THE HOUSE of IRON MEN



by

JACK STEELE

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Mrs. Cree clutched her quickly by the arm, her own face blanched with fear. (Page 273)

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JACK STEELE



FRONTISPIECE IN COLOR

By Clara M. Burd

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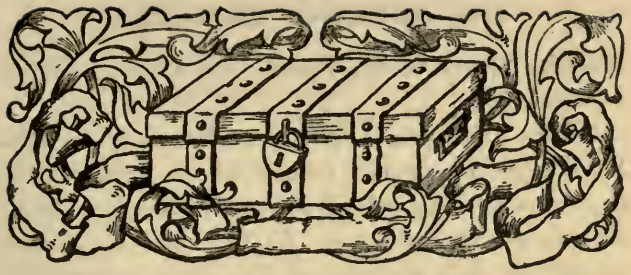
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The House of Iron Men

CHAPTER I

A BIRTHDAY REMEMBRANCE

ONE of the most extraordinary affairs in the criminal and social annals of New York City began in the offices of Julian Vail, Fifth Avenue, at the logical center of the town, on the 17th of May, in a most incredible and probably unparalleled manner.

It was Vail's birthday—an important factor in the mystery so promptly and bafflingly evolved. There was nothing unusual in the day itself, nor about the neighborhood or office, which was, in all significant details, the counterpart of dozens in the building. On the door that led to the marble hall was a legend lettered in gold:

"JULIAN W. VAIL
Railroads Private"

Beyond were the two smaller rooms of the suite, where clerks, stenographers, and other busy func-

tionaries strove to keep pace with Vail's activities in commerce.

On the afternoon in question, when Vail and Miss Iris Puryn, his fiancée, entered at his private door, there was nothing extraordinary in the suite, except in this private sanctum. In this seat of modern forces not only was one of the chairs impressively overloaded with boxes and packages, sent in remembrance of the twenty-seventh anniversary of Julian's birth, but also the most impossible "present" imaginable was standing on end in the corner.

It appeared to be a monster box of flowers—a great white-cardboard box, nearly six feet high and two across, tied with a pink satin ribbon that was six inches wide at the least.

For a moment as Vail and Miss Puryn paused by the door, to gaze in astonishment at this colossal package, neither spoke. Miss Puryn's face, which was placidly and conventionally beautiful, became at once a mask for polite emotions of surprise and curiosity. For not only was the size of the box past all belief, but, across its front, it was labeled in gold with the words:

"A Gift of the Gods"

Vail, recovering promptly from his state of surprise and incredulity, smiled in his cheeriest manner. His friends had prepared an elaborate hoax, perhaps a mechanical toy, he thought, by way of a birthday joke. But Iris was first to speak.

"Well! if I ever!" she exclaimed. "What in the world can it be?"

Vail thrust his hand in his pocket, as they stood there looking at the box.

"It's probably a railroad—a lot of toy cars, locomotives, track, and all the rest. For half a cent I'd let it stand unopened and wait for the sender to give himself away by asking fool questions about it."

But his speech, as he turned to glance at the chair, with the load of parcels upon it, failed in a rare and notable degree to allay Miss Puryn's curiosity. For some inexplicable reason the box excited her unduly.

"I hate all practical jokes," she said. "But I don't believe it *is* a joke. I feel some sort of premonition——" And then, of a sudden, came a change in the tone of her voice. "Julian! I know there is something wrong! *I am sure I saw it shudder!*"

"Shudder?" said Vail, and he laughed. "Oh, come now, Iris, do you think it's a package of ghosts?"

The girl had conceived some awe of the package. Her sensations were not to be lightly dismissed.

"It's as long as a coffin—long enough to hold a skeleton!"

Vail was still convinced the box contained a toy prepared by the boys with no particular occupation but that of having "fun."

"But skeletons never shudder," he said, "while railroads frequently do."

Miss Puryn looked at him disapprovingly.

"I don't feel like jesting in the least, over such a thing as that. Someway it gives me—creeps."

Vail assumed a tragic air, the mockery of which he felt she would understand.

"Creeps! You don't suppose it's a railroad octopus?"

Iris was not to be assured. She moved behind the desk.

"Please don't be absurd," she protested. "If it should be anything terrible—— What do you mean to do?"

Vail was striding towards the great white box to end all doubt at once.

"Take off the lid!"

Iris was excited.

"Yes, but—if it's anything alive—a reptile—animals—— I was certain the whole thing moved!"

"Stop! Look! Listen!" said Vail, as he came to the box and placed his ear against the cover.

There was nothing to be heard. He attempted to lift the case's weight, and was thereupon thoroughly surprised. His effort failed to budge it from the floor.

"Hum!" he added, more impressed, exerting a strength that made him red. "It must be a gold brick, I should say, and a long, wide, thick one at that!" He began to pull at the ribbons.

"I—I don't know whether you'd better open it or not," stammered Iris, more than ever apprehensive. "If anything should jump out suddenly—— Couldn't you call a clerk?"

Vail was unfastening a knot.

"It smells of nothing but violets. Ah! Wire!" he exclaimed. "By George, it's fastened——"

"Oh, please be careful!" Miss Puryn interrupted, her dread momentarily increasing. "If it's fastened with wire, there *must* be something dangerous inside!"

"We'll see," said Vail. The tone of his voice had undergone a change. He turned to the desk for his scissors.

Miss Puryn, with one knee already on a chair, glanced from the man to the box once more, with widely dilated eyes. Suddenly she let out a cry, *for the thing had certainly heaved!*

"Julian! I *saw it move!*" she called, in affright to the man. "You've got to summon help—some officer—someone to come and——"

"There, there. Let's not excite ourselves," he interrupted, calmly. "We are still in my office—and this is New York—broad, open day on the city's most populous thoroughfare. No friends would play a dangerous joke, but they'd certainly laugh if they heard I was afraid of some childish toy."

He was once more assailing the strands of wire that bound the cover to the box. Miss Puryn made no further answer. She repressed an impulse to flee from the room by exerting her utmost will. She eyed the case intently, her face rather white, her lips slightly parted, over teeth exceedingly regular, as her breath came short and fast. She was plainly fascinated, absorbingly curious, and excitedly prepared

at a second's warning to climb to the top of the desk.

Vail, sufficiently curious himself, and not unaffected by the girl's instinctive alarm, was far more cautious than he appeared as he toiled at the wire with his shears.

The ribbon had spanned the box in both directions, up through the center of its length and across the center of its width. When it fell to the floor, in a shimmer of pink, the tough iron strand it had quite concealed was seen to be binding the lid in place with two independent lengths that likewise crossed at the center.

One of these Vail was enabled to untwist. It fell to the floor like a liberated spring and tapped on the box where it struck.

Iris sprang up in her chair.

"Why don't you call a clerk?" she implored, her utterance tense and excited. "I *know* there is something wrong! I know that *something is going to happen!*"

"We'll know the worst in a moment," said Vail, as he snipped through the wire. "Get ready—to laugh at the joke."

Nevertheless, with the wire severed and thrust aside, he leaned one hand with all his weight upon the loosened cover, not to be taken by surprise.

Miss Puryn's eyes were blazingly fixed on the box. Her attitude was one of rigid preparation, where she waited, ready to spring to a height of safety on the desk.

Vail himself, infected by her sense of dread, was thoroughly alert as he felt and listened for the slightest ominous sign to issue from the case.

"Now, then—for the fire-emitting dragon," he said, and, lifting the cover loose at the side sufficiently to glance for a second within the box, he suddenly uttered a chuckling sound and wrenched it away with decision.

"Behold!" he said, "my beautiful——" But he halted, sharply bending forward, fixed in a pose of amazement and startled emotions.

Standing there upright in the cotton-padded case, her brown eyes dazzled by the light, and dazed with the strangeness of her waking, was an exquisite girl —alive, but inert as a stone!

CHAPTER II

THE WAY OF A FIANCÉE

FOR a moment Vail and his fiancée could only stare in unbelief, as the girl gazed blankly upon them.

The whole thing seemed preposterous, some wild, fantastic imagining, too dream-like for anything but folly. Not a word was spoken as the three remained in their places, unmoving, attempting to reconcile what they saw with the acceptable facts of life.

Slowly, languidly, as one made captive by some year-old slumber, broken at last by magic forces, the girl in the box moved her eyes and turned her head.

Into the milk-white oval of her cheeks a tint of color slowly crept. Her red lips parted, their color singularly vivid. One of her hands slightly stirred. A look of alarm and inquiry rose with the steadying lights that tardily returned to her eyes.

Vail—all his faculties bent and riveted upon the contents of the case—was the first to recover reason.

"Good Heavens!" he said, "what's the meaning of this?" and he touched her hand, that was like mere warming clay. "How in the name of reason——"

"Julian!"

The call made him start, as Iris at last found her voice.

She had come a little forward, some utterly feminine resentment already focused on the girl, whom Vail for a moment had thought a doll, encased and sent him for a joke.

"Julian, what—who is this girl?" she demanded. "Why was she sent to you?"

He looked at her blankly.

"How should I know? I don't understand—— She is only half-alive. The explanation——"

"There—on her dress—there's a tag!" Miss Puryn interrupted, her strength and impatience with the situation rapidly increasing together. "If she is labeled—what does it say?"

Vail cast a glance at the helpless girl in the box, a figure of innocence bound and delivered to the fates—and the generous sympathy lodged in his being responded to the wakening appeal in her eyes.

For the girl's sake, as well as his own, he took in his hand the inverted card with which she was, in fact, labeled. He turned it over—and burned a sudden scarlet.

On it was written, in a large, plain chirography:

"Your wife—
MRS. JULIAN VAIL."

Miss Puryn, instantly reading the lines, made a sound that was half a gasp.

"Oh, the shame——!" she started, when Vail vehemently interrupted.

"The outrage!—to any young girl—— Iris, help me! She's fainting!"

The frightened, half-numbed, and wholly bewildered girl, still supported in the case, had abruptly closed her eyes and drooped a little forward, in some swift reaction from her rousing.

Vail attempted to draw her forth and take her to the davenport, in the corner next the window. He found that she was held in her upright position by fastenings just beneath her arms. They were wires, thickly padded.

Iris, far from willing to lend her assistance in a business she instantly conceived to be exceedingly dubious, not only made no move to assist the helpless girl, but instead retreated to the desk.

"How can you hesitate to call some officer?" she asked of Vail, severely. "If you are really innocent—— Don't you realize how this appears? Don't you understand the gravity——"

Vail was fiercely cutting at the padded wires.

"I realize that a helpless girl—doubtless drugged and shut up in a coffin—needs aid and sympathy! If you'll hand me a glass of water—do something—— Ah!"

With the last of the stout supports abruptly severed, the limp form sank a little forward, and must have gone headlong to the floor, had he not swiftly caught her in his arms.

He lifted her bodily, a nerveless bundle of life

and returning warmth, and carried her over to the couch.

Miss Puryn watched, her suspicions, anger, and sense of condemnation enlarging momentarily.

"Surely, Julian," she said, "you understand the necessity of explaining this occurrence? You realize what is due to me?"

"Explanation?" Vail repeated, striding at once to the water-stand, with its big inverted bottle. "You've seen it all. You know as much as I. The first thing to do is to aid, restore——"

"You were startled," Miss Puryn interrupted. "Your only thought is for *her*. Is it true? Is this girl your wife?"

Vail had gone swiftly back to the couch, a glass of water in his hand.

"Good Heavens—no! Don't you see she's a helpless girl that I've got to treat with common human kindness?"

He knelt on the floor by the prostrate form, and, sprinkling and bathing the pallid face, unfastened the collar at her throat.

"Yes," said Miss Puryn, "—and then?"

"Then?" repeated Julian. "I'll find out, if possible, who she is—where she came from—how it happened."

"But you will also send her away, at once?"

"I'll see that she returns to her home, certainly. . . . That's better!" The girl on the couch was reviving. "Take it easy. Don't be alarmed. Just wait, and recover your strength."

His utterance, unconsciously, had taken on a certain tenderness as reassuring as the touch of his hand. Iris was convinced that both his handling and his words were caresses.

The girl from the case had opened her eyes and was looking at Julian dumbly.

He felt he had never in his life encountered such eyes, with such an appeal for friendship.

He was jarred by the voice of his fiancée, who stood at her distance, sharply observing the scene.

"Have you quite overlooked the fact of my existence? Will you kindly end this predicament as soon as possible?"

He looked across at her briefly.

"What would you wish me to do—in addition to what I am doing?"

"Send for someone with authority—ring for an ambulance, perhaps."

"Before we've asked a question?—found out anything about this extraordinary business? Isn't it better——"

The girl on the davenport stirred unexpectedly, and raised herself partially up.

"What is it? What is it?" she asked, a trifle wildly. "Oh!—something dreadful must have happened!"

"You're all right at present," said Vail, reassuringly. "If you'll kindly tell me who you are and where you live, I may be of some little service."

She stared at him peculiarly, her mind still greatly

confused. She sat against the support of the couch, passing her hand across her cheek.

"I—don't know—don't remember," she faltered. Then finding the tag, still dangling at her waist, she gazed at it, reading its words. "Somebody's wife?" she cried, in shocked surprise. "Mrs. Julian—— Your name—isn't Mr. Vail?" Her voice betrayed a new and poignant alarm.

"My name is Vail," said Julian, "but I never even saw you before. How did you come to be sent to me in a box?"

She followed his gesture languidly, gazed blankly on the empty case, and then quite as blankly at Iris, who was coldly scowling in return.

No memories stirred in the girl's groping brain, and her glance roved back to Vail.

"I am sure I have seen you before," she said.

Miss Puryn uttered a note like an accusation.

"All right," said Vail, indulgently. "Now try to remember your name."

He could see the struggle of her intellect to resume its interrupted order. It appeared to thaw, as it were, a cell at a time.

"Why," she said, grasping backwards, as if at the past, "my name—— It used to be Barbara—— My name is Barbara Lee." She sat up more stiffly, she filled her lungs, she battled like a suffocating being—and the life of her brain came rushing back, to awaken new frights in her being.

"Oh, what has happened?" she almost wailed. "Where am I now?"

"In my office, New York City," Vail replied. "You came in that box in the corner. You must have been drugged, of course. If you'll try to help me get at the facts, perhaps I can return you to your friends."

"That box?" she repeated, still almost childishly dazed. "But I haven't any friends—any home. I came to New York to work. . . . We hadn't a thing when father died—but I'm sure I have the strength to work.".

"All right," said Julian, rising at last, still looking intently upon her. "Where did you live when your father died?"

The girl still regarded him wildly.

"In Hartford. If only——"

"You have no mother?"

"She died when I was a child, but please——"

"And your father made no friends in Hartford?"

She shook her head.

"He never made friends, but something—someone——"

Vail was calm, but insistent. "Yes. And why——"

He was interrupted by his fiancée, who was strumming with her fingers on the table.

"If you don't mind, Julian, we are already late at Mrs. Wade's. If Miss Lee is sufficiently recovered, I would suggest we keep our appointment."

The girl on the couch weakly rose, her eyes ablaze with unrelieved confusion.

"I didn't mean to come—to give anyone the slightest trouble," she said, helplessly. "I don't know how anything happened. I'll go—of course—somewhere."

She started to move, but limped with painful effort and clung for support to the couch.

"Go somewhere?" echoed Julian. "You've no place to go. When you came to the city, where did you lodge? Why did you come for work to New York?"

"I came on a promise of employment," she said, striving to conjure back her strength. "A Mrs. Cree I met in Hartford promised me work. . . . She met me at the station when I came. . . . I went to her house. . . . We ate some lunch—and then—I don't remember—I don't remember—not a thing." She appeared to be trying to sweep her mind of mists and obscuring webs.

"But Mrs. Cree's house," said Vail. "You remember where it was?"

"No. . . . We went there in a cab, but—please don't let me cause you any further bother. If you'll only tell me where I can go, my foot may be better in a moment."

Iris rose to sudden heights of generosity, addressing Vail.

"Couldn't you take her in my car to some of the Charity or Christian institutions?"

Julian discovered the look of distress on the face of the helpless girl.

"This affair is not to be dismissed so lightly," he answered. "There is something behind this abomi-

nable business! Someone has perpetrated an outrage on this friendless young lady, and I also am involved. I mean to befriend Miss Lee to the best of my ability—and sift this affair to the bottom."

Iris regarded him coldly.

"You appear to have made your decision without consulting me."

"My dear Iris, you wouldn't expect me to cast Miss Lee on the mercies of the street, when she has come to my office like this?"

Miss Puryn's eyebrows slightly lifted.

"I very much doubt the welcome of my advice in the matter. I shall not remain to hamper your decisions." She started for the door.

"Oh, let me go!" said the worried Miss Lee, who was still quite weak and bewildered. "I'd rather not be the cause of anyone's trouble."

She stepped but once on her injured foot, however, when she came with a moan to the floor.

"Here!" said Julian, instantly lifting her up and placing her again on the couch. "You're lame. You're hurt. You can't go off like this. Iris, if only you'll take off her shoe——"

"Julian!"

"Very well, will you stay while I remove it?" He knelt on the floor in the most straightforward manner of business, raised a tiny little foot that was swollen in its new-looking shoe, and swiftly unfastened its buttons.

Without another word, Miss Puryn turned, went swiftly out, and slammed the office door.

CHAPTER III

THE SHOCK OF COMPLICATIONS

VAIL was thoroughly annoyed by his fiancée's behavior. He started quickly towards the door to plead with Miss Puryn to return. But he realized instantly the uselessness of such a mission, and, turning to place the shoe on his desk, addressed the startled girl.

"I shall ask my clerk to help us, Miss Lee, and, when he gets an easier pair of boots, I can probably find you some sort of temporary quarters."

"You are very kind," said the helpless girl. "I don't know what to do—or what to think—or what may happen next!"

Vail's wonderful good-humor returned. His eyes were exceedingly bright again.

"Don't worry—please. Worse things happened at Waterloo." He went to the door that led to the rooms beyond, drew it open, and called to one of his stenographers, Broughton by name, to come to his assistance.

Broughton, a half-bald, active young man, responded at once to the summons, gazing calmly enough at the girl on the couch, despite a certain surprise her presence naturally excited. The door was closed behind him.

He related, in reply to questions by his chief, that he himself had permitted two men to deliver the case, through the private door, adding that no one else of the office force was aware of its presence in the building. Then, having been cautioned to keep the matter entirely to himself, he was sent for easier shoes and a pair of slippers.

Vail sat down, his arm on the desk at the side of a large brass cartridge shell, once used in a six-pounder Hotchkiss rifle, but now employed as a vase for holding flowers. He looked at the girl steadily, while her two brown eyes were fixed in questioning on his face.

"Well, Miss Lee," he said, cheerily, "this is one of the most extraordinary affairs I have ever experienced. I certainly admit I'm puzzled. When did you take the train from Hartford?"

Doubt, anxiety, and weakness had assailed the girl anew. But Vail inspired her confidence.

"It was Saturday morning."

"Do you know what day it is now?"

"Why—Saturday afternoon."

"No. It's Monday, and——"

"Monday?" she echoed, in new surprise. "But—how can it be Monday?"

"It's the day after Sunday," he assured her, in his friendly, quizzical way. "You probably haven't eaten since you took that poisoned lunch. What did you do about your baggage? What did you have?"

She was wide-eyed with astonishment, but answered to the point.

"Why—my satchel, and a trunk. They are all I have. I carried the bag, and the trunk was checked. Mrs. Cree volunteered to get it."

"Um!" said Vail. "I hope it doesn't contain anything you very greatly prize."

Miss Lee was instantly startled.

"Oh, but it does! I wouldn't have anything—— Oh! What horrible things——"

"There, there," interrupted Julian, quietly. "Those are the minor details in some extraordinary business. I suppose you haven't much money?"

"The little I had was in the bag. How could anyone—— I don't see what it means!" In her agitation she tried to rise, but once more sank with the pain in her foot.

"Never mind," said Vail. "You're hungry now, and weak. But I want you to trust me as a friend—if you feel you can ever put your trust in anyone again. I'll call up a woman I know, near by, a Mrs. Loomis, and secure you quarters at once."

He reached for the telephone, but struck the tall brass cartridge shell, which toppled giddily, spilling a cup or more of water on the offending shoe that had injured the girl's imprisoned foot. He caught it up and steadied it back on its base.

"No harm done—none at all," he said, and, presently greeting Mrs. Loomis over the wire, was gratified to know that her most desirable apartment was vacant and that something hot and sustaining, by way of a lunch, would be forthwith prepared for her

guest, who, Julian informed her, would presently arrive.

He hung up the instrument, arising to go to the long white case in the corner, for a closer inspection of its features.

It was, as he had expected, a strong, wooden construction, merely veneered with cardboard to give it a light appearance. It was reinforced at the corners with steel. Down in the wad of cotton near the base was something wrapped in paper.

It proved to be a hat, with a half-worn pair of gloves rolled up in a lump and tucked inside the crown. He had only ascertained these facts when Broughton returned from the nearest shop with his bundle of shoes and slippers.

Miss Lee had so far recovered her normal strength as to require no further assistance in removing her second shoe.

Fifteen minutes later, with Broughton as well as Vail to escort her, she was on her way in a taxicab to the home of Mrs. Loomis. No one in the party observed a man who, evidently ready with a second hired conveyance, quietly "shadowed" the trio all the way, made a note of the house, and disappeared from the street.

Broughton returned to the office. Mrs. Loomis had met the party at the door. That Miss Lee was a homeless and friendless young woman, decoyed to the town and cast in his way by vicissitudes of fortune, was promptly, if somewhat vaguely, explained by the puzzled Vail.

"This box comprises all Miss Lee's baggage, at present," he added, tossing the parcel of new and untried boots on a chair, "but we'll get her trunk and bag as soon as possible. Meantime, Mrs. Loomis——"

"Oh!" interrupted Miss Lee, looking quickly about her, in worry. "I forgot my other shoes! They are at your office! They will not be lost, Mr. Vail? You'll see they are kept quite safe?"

"I can send them," said Vail, "if you wish."

She looked at him peculiarly.

"I wouldn't lose them for the world. I hope—I wonder—— But I've been so much trouble already!"

"I'll keep them safely, till I come again," he assured her readily. "I shall probably call this evening. I hope you'll have a good substantial meal and take a nap, for your strength is rather important."

Mrs. Loomis, a good old motherly person, would have laid down her life for Vail.

"I'll be ready in just two jiffies!" she said, and hastened down the stairs.

Vail held out his hand. "Good-by, till I see you again."

Barbara's tremulous little hand was honestly responsive as he held it momentarily and gazed in her warm, brown eyes. A thrill he took no time to understand stirred in the depths of his nature.

"Good-by," she answered. "I hope you won't

think—— I don't know what to say—what it could possibly mean—or what to look for now."

"You may look for help to clear it up," he told her, gayly. "Don't try to puzzle it out alone. Just rest, this afternoon."

Still marveling, and still subconsciously irritated by all that Iris had said and done, yet aware that the matter might be grave beyond all present calculation, he finally reached his office, and stood for a moment baffled as he gazed at the empty box that had held his birthday "gift."

Presently advancing to the desk, he took up the little, offending shoe that his flower vase had soaked. A startling thing thereupon occurred.

The heel, merely glued to the body of the shoe, and wet by the water from his vase, came loosely away in his hand. There, in a hollow, skillfully cut in the apparently solid leather, was something wrapped in cotton wadding.

He shook it out. The cotton fell away. A great fiery ruby—a pigeon's blood gem of incomparable luster—lay gleaming in his hand.

Then a sharp knock sounded on the door.

CHAPTER IV

VISITORS AND UNEASINESS

VAIL had never in his life experienced a greater sensation of astonishment than that which surged upon him as he gazed at the stone in his hand.

He scarcely heard the knocking at the door. A cataract of sudden suspicions and conflicting emotions plunged in tumult through his brain.

There was neither the time nor opportunity for analysis of the situation or his own disordered thoughts. He only knew that someone wished to enter, that the jewel in his hand might prove exceedingly embarrassing, and that, come what might, he must for the moment obey some unreasoning impulse to protect the girl who had come as "A gift of the Gods."

Hurriedly looking about for a place in which to conceal the gem, he dropped it down inside the tall brass cartridge shell that had spilled the water on the shoe.

The knock on the door was repeated. About to call to the visitor to enter, Vail's thought returned to Miss Lee's footgear. He instantly caught them up. The safe was still unlocked. He strode to it

hastily, thrust them into an empty pigeon hole, and, withdrawing some papers from another receptacle, crowded them in to hide the shoes.

"Come in!" he called, as he closed the ponderous iron box and twirled the combination. "Come in!"

It was Broughton who entered, an odd expression on his face as he offered a card to his chief.

Vail was no less astonished than his secretary.

"Gardner?" he said. "John Gardner? Here? What for?"

Broughton shrugged his shoulders.

"All right," said Vail. "Show him in."

Broughton disappeared, and presently a keen-visaged, typical man of the Wall-street genus was confronting his one acknowledged antagonist in the railroad fight that had long involved a Western section, while his quick glance inventoried all the room.

"How are you, Vail?" he queried, not uncordially. "Still celebrating Christmas?"

Vail, who was frowning, resumed his more cheerful expression. Nevertheless, he was puzzled to know what possible reason this man of all others in great New York could have for such an untimely invasion. An invasion he mentally dubbed it since it was quite inconceivable that Gardner could have come on any save a sinister errand.

"Birthday," he answered, apparently with perfect unconcern. "Won't you have a seat?"

Gardner moved forward and occupied a chair that faced the mysterious case in the corner. He smiled slightly.

"Good, easy chair. Nice furnishings. . . . Just dropped in, Vail, as I was passing, to see if you care to sell your holdings in B. & K. C."

Vail repressed an impulse to tell the man he lied. He was still exceedingly busy attempting to fathom the motive that had brought about this visitation.

"Your memory is good and easy, too," said he. "You had my answer a month ago." He noted the concentrated attention his rival focused on the empty case against the wall as he added, "I have had no occasion to alter my first decision."

There was just a hint of challenge in the look the older railroad man directed across the desk.

"I wouldn't ask you to sell it if I didn't want that road."

"Exactly. And I shouldn't refuse to part with the property if I found it undesirable."

Gardner narrowed his gaze. "I generally get what I want."

Vail smiled. "I usually keep what I have."

Gardner rose. "Nice quarters, but a little far from the Street."

Vail, abruptly convinced that this unrelenting rival's visit was in some way concerned with the singular appearance of Miss Barbara Lee on the scene, was about to reply as before when once again a knock was sounded on the door.

Without awaiting either ceremony or the slightest invitation, two dapper young scions of Swelldom immediately entered, eager to share in anything partaking of a novel sensation. One was Dick Puryn,

only brother of Julian's fiancée. His companion was young "Beau" Cranch, a being of rare irresponsibility and taste in style and dress.

It was the latter who revealed the purpose of this late afternoon attention.

"By Jove, Gardner! you here already?" he said, the instant he was well within the threshold. "I say, are you and Julian doing the lion and the lamb tableau, or have you just heard about it, too? Must have got it by wireless! My word, Vail, you are the lucky devil, you know, but what have you done with the girl?"

Young Puryn was almost equally obstreperous.

"Greatest stunt I ever heard of, 'pon my honor," he declared, going at once to the case against the wall, "—live girl, coming along like a box of chocolates! What do you know about that? Come on now, old fellow, give us a look at the calico!" He turned about the cover of the great white case and exclaimed in renewed enthusiasm: "What a stunt! 'A Gift of the Gods!' I say, we've got to see the girl, you know—got to pass judgment on the 'gift'! No wonder Sis was excited. It's the greatest——"

Vail at last interrupted.

"I hope you won't mind my hinting that Mr. Gardner and myself were engaged in a business interview?"

"I've nothing more to say," declared Gardner, moving towards the door, "—unless you've changed your mind."

Vail met the cold glance with his baffling smile and shook his head.

"Good-afternoon."

Gardner nodded.

"Let me wish you many happy returns of the day." A faint suspicion of sarcasm lurked in his utterance, and with one more nod he departed.

"Dick," said Vail, to young Puryn, "where is Iris?"

"My dear old chap, I don't know," said the dapper young Richard, lightly. "I should say in some 'phone booth, likely, busy with the wire. It's far more to the point, you know, to tell us what you've done with the girl."

Vail's interest in Iris continued.

"She 'phoned you of this? She asked you to come here—you and Cranch?"

"What else could she do? She's entitled to a bit of curiosity, old chap, being a woman, you know. And, after all, I'm her brother."

Cranch was inspecting the case.

"Oh, rot all that!" he exclaimed, impatiently. "You might show us the package—the girl—or how can we help you in the least?"

Vail continued to focus on Puryn.

"Your impression is that Iris is telephoning this story all about the town?"

Richard grinned.

"Did Gardner come on business, or on this?" and he motioned to the box. "You know Gardner and Sis—if it hadn't been for you——"

"Never mind that, Dick, just at present," Vail interrupted, quietly. "Just what did Iris request of you and Cranch?"

"What would you expect? She wishes to know what you've done with the girl. She says she must have an explanation, and all that sort of thing—wants to know what it means. I call it a deucedly clever adventure. You can count on us, you know, old chap, but of course we must have a look at the lady in the case." And he laughed in assurance of his wit.

"Thank you," said Vail. "I'll 'phone you the moment I need your valued aid."

Both Cranch and Puryn stared at Vail in amazement. It was Dick who spoke.

"You refuse to let us see the girl—to tell us where she is?"

Vail was sorting papers on his desk.

"It doesn't seem entirely necessary, just at present."

"After this extraordinary occurrence?" demanded Puryn. "I say! Don't you realize the gravity of the situation? What shall I say to Sis?"

"That I shall hope to call this evening." Vail took up a bundle of letters and commenced their deliberate perusal.

Dick attempted a laugh.

"You're all right, old chap—accustomed to having a girl arrive in a box every day. . . . Well, so-long. Don't forget we offered our assistance."

"Thanks," said Vail. "So-long."

Despite his apparent calm, he was up and pacing the office the moment his visitors were gone. A realizing sense that the matter might prove to be one of exceeding gravity was swiftly crystallizing in his mind. The aspect of the whole affair had undergone a transformation within the last fifteen minutes. The ruby's discovery, Gardner's unprecedented appearance, and Miss Puryn's folly in acquainting all their friends with the story had conjured up such possibilities of complications as the man could not have dreamed would attach to the incident he had felt might be but a foolhardy joke at the worst.

What could it possibly mean? How and by whom had the thing been planned, and what was its ultimate purpose? Was his own deliberate ruin the objective sought, and, if so, by whom, and towards what end?

Gardner, he knew, would be glad to avail himself of anything likely to cripple or disgrace a foe who had dealt him defeat both in love and war. The man had desired a matrimonial alliance with Iris Puryn even more than he coveted that all-important railroad link, the well-known B. & K. C. And yet, had he planned this extraordinary *coup de main*, how could he possibly have added that complicating ruby?

It was the great red gem that flung disturbing corruscations through Vail's revolving thoughts. He only knew that some insistent wish to have the girl proved innocent followed each flash of the

jewel's baleful gleaming in his mind with arguments supporting his desire.

If only she had not exhibited so much concern respecting the safety of her shoes, the man could have been infinitely more easy in his mind. If the whole affair had been carefully planned and Miss Lee had lent her services—— The thought was absurd! She could never have planned that the heel of her shoe should break away in his hand! At most she could merely have intended to leave the boot in his possession—make him custodian of the ruby, as part of some intricate crime!

"Nonsense!" he cried to himself, impatiently. She had given every evidence of bodily distress, of victimized innocence, of helpless and frightened maltreatment at the hands of unscrupulous knaves! The stone might be an imitation. She might not have known of its presence in her shoe! Moreover, to land the jewel in his office could never have required a scheme so difficult of execution as this sending of a living girl, delivered in a box.

He could not and did not, however, lose sight of the fact that the affair demanded immediate and careful attention. Despite his irresponsibility, a certain piquancy in the singular encounter with his "Gift of the Gods," he was thoroughly aware that men are constantly victimized by their scheming, unscrupulous kind. He conceded that women, no less than men, are adept in deceptions, blackmail, and adventure.

He halted his pacing, to stare in resentment at

the cartridge-shell vase where the ruby had been dropped. How gladly he might have welcomed the astounding arrival of a birthday remembrance so wholly lovely, were it not for that accusing stone!

His thought returned to the shoes in the safe, through a sudden reflection that the second heel might likewise contain unimagined treasures. Not without a certain sort of excitement, he opened the ponderous box and extracted the leathern articles of suspicion.

A hasty examination of the heel of the second shoe revealed nothing indicative of glue or a hollowed recess. It successfully resisted his effort to wrench it loose. He decided it was innocent of hidden surprises.

The glue on the other less innocent boot had dried, or so nearly hardened as to render reattachment of the heel through its means impracticable. Convinced that Miss Lee would request the return of her footgear soon, Vail conceded the wisdom of replacing the heel at once.

He went to his desk, pulled open the lowermost drawer, and, placing a box of screws and nails at hand, with a hammer, screwdriver, forceps, and other utensils, selected an awl and a long slender screw with which to repair the damage.

Fortunately the shoes were new. The thin false sole, always pasted inside from heel to toe, was readily torn from place for a distance sufficiently long to meet his requirements. In the briefest time he had drilled accurately down in the hollowed heel

and driven the long screw home. The job was finished and invisible when he once more pasted in its place the flimsy inner sole.

He had housed his tools and risen to replace the shoes in the iron box as before, when a sudden jangling of the telephone lent a nervous haste to his movements. He thrust the boots in their former pigeon hole—and closed but forgot to lock the door of the safe upon them.

"Hullo!" he called, across the wire. "Hullo!—hullo!—who is it? Oh, Mrs. Loomis? . . . Why, yes, I can come, but what—— Miss Lee is what? She's ill?—She's—— Never mind. I'll come at once. . . . No, no. Don't summon a doctor. Wait till I can see her for myself. I'll be there in fifteen minutes!"

Swayed in all his sympathies once more by what he had heard through the instrument, he dropped the telephone to snatch up his hat, when a thought of the ruby stopped him. He could hardly expect to return here again to-day. Whether to take the precious stone, or to place it for greater security in the safe, was a question that troubled him abruptly.

As he hung there, undecided, a new complication was added to the case. The telephone rang once more. The Chief of Police was the man at the farther end.

Vail felt a sense of sinking at his vitals as he caught the name across the wire.

"Oh, Faxon, how are you?" he asked at once, with all the calm in his command. "I'm feeling fine

—yes. . . . Thanks. . . . What's that? . . . Oh, no—no, no! It's nothing at all, I'm sure, but a practical joke. . . . Miss Puryn 'phoned you?—asked you what? . . . Why, thank you, Faxon, but I don't believe it's a case for any of your boys. . . . No, no! I'm sure it's nothing serious. . . . Yes—thank you—I'll be glad to avail myself of your services if it should develop anything—— Thank you for the offer. . . . Yes, I'll let you know if anything comes of it, of course. . . . Good-by."

He hung up the telephone, aware that, in a way, he had made himself accomplice to any questionable acts in which the strange young woman might chance to be involved. He was keeping both the ruby and the secret. As for Iris and her indiscriminate activity in the matter, his impatience knew no bounds.

"I'm mad!" he said, in protest to himself. "I'm absolutely mad!" He moved to take up the 'phone, to inform Mrs. Loomis he could not come, after all. But he halted. "I can't!" he exclaimed. "I can't abandon a helpless girl!—at least not while she's sick!"

Convinced the ruby was more successfully concealed than as if he had placed it under lock and key, he hastened through the outer offices, informed young Broughton he should not return for the day, and was presently driving in a taxicab for the house that harbored his "Gift."

CHAPTER V

STARTLING DISCOVERIES

A NATURAL reaction from over-excitement, her fasting, and the weird adventure that could hardly be thought to be concluded, had claimed Miss Lee for its own.

She had roused from a nap in a fever, and mild delirium had seized upon her faculties to overthrow their adjustment. She was lying on a couch, fully dressed and quietly sobbing, as Vail came into the room.

Mrs. Loomis had been called downstairs again and closed the door.

Vail went at once to the couch beside the window and seated himself in a chair. He placed his hand on Barbara's shoulder.

"There, there," he said, "I wouldn't cry, Miss Lee. You're all right now. You're with friends."

She turned and appeared to listen, looking at him with long-lashed eyes as searching as a child's. But the light in their depths was uncertain.

She hesitated, seemed about to place her hand on Julian's face, and shrank again in the baffled timidity of a drifting intelligence.

Vail called her back in his cheery manner.

"Barbara—— You knew me, Barbara."

"Oh, father!" she cried, in sudden joy. "I thought you were gone! I thought you were gone! My heart was nearly breaking!"

Not only did she suddenly raise herself erect, but she slipped to her knees before the chair that Julian occupied and, throwing her arms about his neck, pressed her lips upon his cheek in an ecstasy of joy.

"Father, you won't go off again?" she begged. "You won't go off and leave me all alone?"

"There, there, you mustn't be excited," was all Vail could answer to her troubles. "Just lie down and have a good rest—and don't worry."

She seemed to listen, in a way.

"There's no one in all the world but you!" And she clung to Vail with a new appeal that thrilled him and smote him together.

Her beauty, her helplessness, even the illusion that made her cling with her arms about him, somewhat drugged his senses and overwhelmed his ordinary reason.

She sank again upon the couch, her eyes now large and luminous with some change in her mental chaos.

"Oh, New York!—anything!—anything but this!" she said, incoherently. "It doesn't matter now! I've got to live! Perhaps he'd never find me there! . . . I'll go! I'll go! . . . Father, I can't——" Her voice was changed to a moan. "Oh, something dreadful has happened. . . . My shoes—you'll keep them safe?"

She stared at Vail and he answered, quietly:

"Don't worry. I've locked them in the box."

She sat up, rigidly, her gaze still fixed upon his face. Some singular change was taking place where order came back to her mind. Vail could almost read the phases of the struggle in her being. She passed her hand across her eyes as if to dissipate their blur and steady their filmy focus on something solid and real.

"Then it was a dream—some of it—— Oh, I don't know what to believe," she told him, helplessly. "But you promised to take me to a friend."

His relief at her sudden and unexpected recovery was boundless.

"You are with friends," he answered. "If you'll just rely on that, Miss Lee, perhaps you will worry less. You must try to be quiet, you know."

A light of gratitude warmed to a glow in her eyes. She felt she could cry and be restored by the process. She smiled faintly.

"But I've been such a trouble, already—— Did I faint?"

"No, you've been asleep. Do you wish me to summon a doctor?"

"Why, no," she answered, bravely. "I think I'm only tired and nervous. I'll try to get better—relieve you as soon as possible."

"Please don't," he said, "—I mean, please take things perfectly easy. Above all things, don't worry about the bother to me."

She tried to smile again, but doubts were in her

mind. Vertigo and haziness oppressed her, but her courage and will prevailed.

"Is it still Monday afternoon?"

"It is nearly Monday evening."

She appeared more nervous or constrained.

"Did I ask you before to please take care of the shoes I left at your office—if it isn't too much trouble?"

"You did," said Vail. "They are in the safe." It jarred him back to a hundred vague suspicions, all more unwelcome than before.

"Thank you," she murmured. "I suppose it seems very foolish, but I particularly wanted to keep them—for the sake of my father."

Vail could think of a hundred different meanings that such a statement might imply. He was eager to believe that her motive was one of entire innocence. And yet—the gleam of that baleful ruby was cast athwart his reflections like a sinister ray of crime.

He seized upon the mention of her father's name with ill-concealed avidity.

"You said Mr. Lee had few or no friends in Hartford, I believe?"

She answered readily:

"No one he could really call a friend."

"Did you tell me he was some sort of inventor?"

She had not, but her memory was wholly indistinct.

"Perhaps I did. He was—— At least he made many experiments, with inventions in view, I suppose."

Vail felt his heart-beat quicken.

"Perhaps he was the gentleman of whom I have heard who was striving to manufacture artificial gems?"

A tint of color mounted to her face.

"Why—I don't see how anybody ever heard!" she told him, candidly. "He couldn't have told, I'm sure."

Vail was overwhelmed with gladness.

"But you see that someone must have told," he answered, a new conviction that the stone in his office was not a genuine ruby now welcomed in his mind. "And I'm sure that the knowledge could never accomplish harm."

"But if anyone wishes to keep his actions secret—I mean if anyone prefers—strives all his life——You don't remember who could have told you?" She seemed to be distressed.

Vail, in possession of facts that he felt would clear away the last faint fog of suspicion trailing about this wholly engaging young woman, now smiled reassuringly, in his naturally cheering manner.

"Why, no, I couldn't remember," he said. "It isn't my line. You mustn't excite yourself again by thinking of anything at all. To-morrow we'll go at everything, very seriously, and work out our problem together."

"Our problem?" Her eyes were girlishly wide.

"Why, yes—just how and why you were sent to my office—as a gift. I ought to know whom to

thank." He laughed and she felt the subtle change that had come upon him.

She was still bewildered, worried—and facing the vast unknown—the destiny that the huge, impersonal city might mete in its giant way, neither with mercy nor without it, to one so helpless as herself.

Mrs. Loomis once more entered the room.

Vail immediately rose and took up his hat.

"Your patient is much better again," he said. "See that she has a hearty dinner and a long night of rest, or I'll order in a doctor, sure as fate."

Barbara, too, had risen. He turned to her smilingly and held out his hand.

"Until to-morrow—good-night."

Rays of pure gratitude and joy shone from her eyes as she lost her hand in his clasp.

"Good-night," she said. "I'll promise not to be so weak, or such a trial to-morrow."

"Please don't change very greatly," he begged, "—except to forget your cares."

He went with a vision of her beauty lending strange, new emotions to his being. He was driven at once to a florist's, and reckless of appearances, his relationship with Iris Puryn, or the jealousy of fate, sent a gorgeous armful of roses with his card, inscribed to "Miss Barbara Lee."

It was six o'clock. He walked the few blocks up Fifth Avenue between the florist's and his quarters and dressed himself for dinner.

At seven, glad for once to think of dining alone—with his thoughts of a birthday gift—he made his

way leisurely into the gold and marble dining-room conducted in the building and selected a corner seat.

The waiter, with excited attentiveness, came hastening there with half a dozen evening papers, as if he esteemed them the first essential course of a dinner.

Vail ordered with extravagant generosity and took up the *Evening Star.*

In type nearly six inches high and red as gore appeared a headline that gripped like barbed steel at his heart. His quick eye ran over the lines.

SENSATIONAL MURDER AND THEFT!

The Great Gatama Ruby Stolen with Gems of Untold Wealth!

Police Discover a Crime That Is Three Days Old!

Wealthy Indian Maharajah Lured to an Empty House of Former Grandeur and Slaughtered for his Treasures!

Frightened Servant of the Murdered Prince Reveals Amazing Facts in a Case That Doubtless Involves Most Intricate Tangle of Plots!

In less than three minutes of reading Vail was convinced that the world-famous gem described in the sheet was the ruby at present reposing in the empty shell on his desk!

CHAPTER VI

MISGIVINGS AND STRUGGLES

THE account in the *Star*, though several times repeated as to details, was nevertheless unsatisfactory in many particulars, especially to Vail.

In brief, it related how the metropolitan police, warned by one Dalai Kim, a self-styled servant of the Maharajah Sindore, to the effect that his eminent master had been for several days missing from his lodgings, had upon this afternoon discovered the distinguished Indian Prince, slain in one of New York's former palatial residences, now empty of tenants, and had there encountered unmistakable evidence of the blackest sort of crime.

The house showed signs of recent but probably secret occupancy, for it was dusty, dilapidated, and boarded up as to doors and windows. All the former furnishings had been piled in disorder in the rooms of the second story. Indications pointed to the fact that one of the rooms had been especially prepared, cleaned, and reappointed to present a semi-hospitable appearance. It had become, by this process, a combination dining-room and bedroom. A few scattered dishes and fragments of food still remained upon the table, coated with a new film of dust already gathered from the air.

The murdered man had been strangled. The body was found in one of the empty rooms below the furnished quarters, the clothing half-torn from the limbs, and a belt he had evidently worn beneath his undergarments slashed wide upon and rifled. A slight wound gashed upon the dead man's forehead, and slightly resembling a cross, had furnished the one small trickle of red that argued a brief but futile struggle.

It was Dalai Kim who supplied the information that the Maharajah Sindore had borne upon his person the great Gatama ruby and a treasury of lesser stones, consisting mainly of diamonds. But concerning the reason why this Oriental prince had come to Gotham, or why he should have brought the famous stone—held sacred in the temples of his gods—the olive-colored Dalai Kim was incredibly uninformed.

There were dark hints as to hidden plots in which this famous jewel might have figured. Indeed, the presence of the wondrous stone in the uncongenial setting of Manhattan was alleged to be the most amazing element in all the mysterious business. That its final possession had furnished the motive for the crime was boldly declared by the writer who had trimmed up the story for the *Star*.

It was nothing of these conjectures that held or bothered Vail. He was oppressed by a haunting conviction that somehow Barbara Lee was guiltily concerned in this tangle of crime.

What could be more insidious, more crafty, and

baffling to investigation than for such a young woman, concealing the stone in the heel of her boot, to masquerade as a friendless waif of destiny, beneath the protecting care and interest of such a man as himself?

And yet she has appeared so entirely frank and innocent! Moreover, Gardner, who above all men would be glad to eliminate a rival in business and love, had appeared so promptly on the scene at the office, and with such a slender excuse!

The stone in his vase was the great Gatama ruby —and Vail had fondly persuaded himself the gem was a poor crank's imitation! The girl had been so eager concerning her shoes—repeatedly worried and solicitous! She must, of course, have known the worth of that little pair of boots!

A revealing sense of the appalling extent to which he was himself involved came glaringly upon his over-active senses. He had more than guilty knowledge of the crime—he had the stone itself! Already the chief of police was aware that into his office had been carried a strange young woman, in a box, for whom there was no accounting. The story of this had gone around past all redemption. He could never hope to conceal Miss Lee from either the law or his friends.

He was certain both the law and his friends would presently be hot on her trail. Already he saw her charged with complicity in this sordid crime. She might be innocent, despite it all; and by no earthly right could the curious, the merciless, or the victim-

demanding world either annoy or precondemn her. She was young, a parentless girl, if her word could be accepted, whose plight demanded his protection! Nevertheless, he derided himself for his folly. He knew nothing of her parentage, her social standing, or her antecedents.

What should he do with that blood-red ruby in his keeping? How should he come upon the truth? And how fend off the law? How far might the New York detectives be expected to follow the stone? How far should he go in concealing the secret of this strange young woman's shoe?

He could not even regret her advent in his life—as he rose from the table to escape to the outer air. Yet he somewhat sickened at the thought that all she had done might have been but clever acting.

He nearly bowled the waiter through the wall. The fellow had come with his dinner—viands for which the worried Vail had neither the appetite nor inclination.

"Never mind," he said, apologetically, "I can't eat, after all."

He thrust a five-dollar bill on the tray and continued on to the door.

"Please, Mr. Vail!" cried a voice, at his heels, and he turned to find a messenger there with a telegram offered on a tray.

He took it up and tore the yellow envelope apart, prepared to receive another shock respecting Miss Barbara Lee. But the wire was signed with the name of Iris Puryn.

"Please call this evening as early as possible," was the text of her request.

He went out in the street and was presently headed up Fifth Avenue, already being rapidly deserted.

It was something more than forty blocks to the Puryn mansion, facing Central Park, but he wished the distance twice as long, for his need of open air. He had all but forgotten Iris and her untoward behavior of the afternoon. His relations with her seemed preposterous now, a strange arrangement of conventionality heretofore accepted with little or no emotion.

He had, he admitted, conceived a certain sense of triumph over Gardner and others, in engaging himself to a girl of Miss Puryn's characteristics. She was beautiful, in her formal, highly finished manner; she was as wealthy as himself, and her social position was assured. She had been, as it were, the capital prize in the lottery of life wherein they both revolved. But whether he had captured the prize or the prize had captured him was a point whereon he had felt his doubts, in a tolerant, half-interested manner.

Already it appeared to him unthinkable that she should be the master of his life. Already some nascent resentment was arousing in his veins, at the tone of assumption and authority in her telegram desiring him to appear. It was not that he contemplated actual emancipation from his bond, nor yet that he was ready for surrender to the lawless joys aroused in his being by contact with Barbara Lee.

He was, however, made acutely aware that everything heretofore experienced in his nature had been but the tamest, insubstantial excuse for the steps he had taken, and that he was honorably bound to one who left him cold, while a sudden interest had centered on another of whom he knew nothing save things that appeared as black as the very abysses of Hades.

What he should do or say when he once more confronted his fiancée he scarcely took time to decide. He was far more concerned with the aspect of things respecting Miss Lee and the ruby of which he had become the reluctant custodian. His duty as a citizen, possessed of vital knowledge respecting the crime described in the press, was clear and unmistakable. Yet he could not even contemplate a confession that must instantly sweep the helpless girl into all the vortex of the law, while any chance of her innocence remained.

Far up the Avenue he swung along, past the great white marble cathedral, past the brown-stone palaces of Gotham's money kings, and past the Plaza, with its conclave of mighty hostelries, busily parting fools from their cash. Then Central Park flung vapors of spring, new foliage, and fragrant grass athwart his senses, to arouse new delights in his nature.

He was still a battlefield for fiercely opposed emotions when he came at length to the Puryn home and was ushered upstairs to Iris's Oriental "den."

CHAPTER VII

HOW MYSTERIES MAY THICKEN

MISS PURYN was still excited. Her color was high; her eyes were brilliant. She had rehearsed the tale of what occurred in Julian's office till every word he had uttered and every accent of the word had taken on significance demanding explanation.

Her one regret lay in the fact that she had quitted the office prematurely. It was what had happened since that moment that she was now determined to discover. If the story printed in the evening press concerning the murder and theft of gems had come to her attention at all, it had been dismissed as trifling—compared with her own affairs.

She had purposely assumed a calm demeanor she was very far from feeling. She greeted Vail with a certain air of ownership and conducted him at once to a corner most stuffily overdraped with Persian hangings, where a door that led to apartments beyond had long been closed as useless.

She broached the subject promptly.

"I thought I would give you this early opportunity of stating what disposition you have made of

the 'present' with which you were honored this afternoon."

Vail resented her attitude as needlessly derisive.

"You probably mean Miss Lee," he answered. "I was certain your curiosity ceased when you left the office. I was sorry not to be able to reach you afterwards and warn you to keep the occurrence strictly secret, by way of aiding in clearing up the puzzle."

His veiled rebuke for her senseless spreading of the story did not escape her discernment. She elevated her brows.

"May not our opinions differ as to the value of publicity in solving your diverting 'mystery'?"

"They doubtless do differ—widely," he answered. "Had no one known of this save ourselves, the practical joker would doubtless have revealed himself by asking if the 'present' was received."

"That is hardly here nor there, at present," she said, watching his expression narrowly. "I am far more interested to know what you have since done with Miss Lee."

"I have delivered her over to the care of an excellent woman."

"Who is the woman? Where does she live?"

"She is no one you know or would ever be likely to meet."

"You mean you refuse the information?"

"There is more information spread about the matter now than will ever serve useful ends to anyone concerned."

Once more she raised her brows.

"Are you not forgetting our relationship? This is a matter that concerns me intimately."

"In what respect?—more, I mean, than anything else of a business nature that transpires wholly in my office, during office hours?"

"Do you mean to intimate that such an affair as this does not concern me in the least?—that it is just like any ordinary occurrence of business?"

He was not to be fogged or entrapped.

"I asked you in what respect this affair touches you, or our—relations?"

Her surprise at his question was genuine.

"Wasn't she a girl—a living girl—sent to you as a gift?"

"Am I obliged to accept every gift that someone's folly or scheming may bring to my door?"

"You refused to send the girl away. You have harbored her since and refuse to tell me where."

"And that argues what?"

"It might argue a very great deal. Are you ready to declare you feel no personal interest in the girl?"

"On the contrary, I take a decided interest in Miss Lee, and also in the meaning and intent of the whole transaction. I purpose, if possible, to discover who was behind——" He turned abruptly at a trifling sound, a feeling upon him that someone, concealed nearby, was overhearing every word.

His action apparently escaped his fiancée, intent upon her catechism.

"Have you employed an expert detective?"

"I have not."

"I thought not, and I trust you will appreciate my position and motives when I inform you that I have."

Vail looked at her steadily, if possible more annoyed than before. A sudden suspicion flashed upon his mind. Her detective might be present in the room.

"Is he here in the house to-night?"

"He is not. He will call to see you in the morning."

Half-convinced there was someone hidden by the heavily folded curtain, Vail's doubts remained alive.

"Who is it you have hired?"

"Who could I hire but Mr. Garrison?"

"You are very thoughtful," said Vail, sincerely gratified to know the affair would at least be handled with the most consummate skill. Indeed, the more he reflected upon it the more he welcomed the advent of Garrison, the criminologist, who, more than any man he knew, would be likely to sift this matter to the bottom as a gentleman and not as a mere common sleuth.

If Iris had expected a flare of indignation at her action, she concealed her disappointment. Her manner was no less cold than before.

"Perhaps you will feel sufficient confidence in Mr. Garrison to inform him of the things you feel obliged to conceal from me."

Vail shrugged his shoulders. He was nettled, with the weight of his knowledge upon him.

"I intend to work this matter out my way, from first to last. The help he might have rendered earlier is now impossible. I am accustomed to handling my business affairs in my own particular manner—and frequently alone."

Iris was crimson.

"Take care, Julian," she warned him, in a voice that betrayed her emotion. "I may cease to be so patient with this 'practical joke' if you carry your high-handed attitude too far."

Vail arose, in a growing uneasiness of spirit.

"This is an ill time to discuss our patience with one another. I have refrained from complaining of interference that has already——"

"Interference?" she interrupted. "Am I a mere child—a mere incident in this affair. Have I no rights, no——"

Vail had started to seat himself again when the faintest rustle aroused his suspicions as before and quickened the beat of his heart.

"Iris——" he started, and turning alertly to the curtain was positive it swayed a trifle outward, as if from a draught of air.

He stood beside the couch a second, undecided, then turning, as if to pace across the tiger-skin rug, made a feint of tripping and plunged headforemost towards the draperies, clutching them as if for support.

He expected his arms to close about a human form, but nothing was there save the door.

"I beg your pardon," he said, at once. "That

was stupidly awkward, and nearly cost me a fall. I believe I'm nervous. I've eaten no dinner. I'll be wiser to bid you good-night."

Iris, too, had risen.

"Let me ring for something at once."

"I couldn't eat," he answered. "I didn't mean to hint that I am hungry."

Iris blocked his way.

"You can hardly be more overwrought than I concerning this outrageous 'joke,' as you please to call it. We have scarcely more than begun the discussion of the subject. How can you leave?"

Vail concealed his impatience.

"What possible profit can result from further disagreements on the topic?"

"That's precisely it," she declared, with warmth. "Why must you so stubbornly persist in disagreeing with my conceptions of the case? Of course, if you have lost your heart and reason to Miss Lee——"

He crimsoned.

"Iris! Do you think that a worthy speech?"

He could think of nothing else to say with her shot so accurately centered. A sense of shame at his senselessness, his helplessness in the matter, made her accusation sting.

"Worthy?" she echoed. "Am I posted to the world as your fiancée or am I not? The least you can do is to tell me what you mean to do with Miss Lee."

"I mean to treat her as a human being—not as

an outcast animal to be sent to some institution for merciful asphyxiation."

"You said you would send her home."

"She seems to have no home."

"But don't you see that you simply cannot put her in a private place and pay her expenses? You can see how that must appear."

He smiled, mirthlessly.

"To whom would you have me shift the burden? Will you give her shelter here?"

"Here?" she echoed. "Are you mad? Don't you realize that anyone sent about in a box like that must be the commonest—— Oh, I don't know what to think of your judgment—your consideration of me! I shall simply be obliged to insist that you——"

Her demand was interrupted. Her sister Enid appeared in the door dressed as if returning from an evening drive in her car.

"Oh, here you are!" she called at once, in a tone of gayety that never failed to jar on Julian's nerves. "I thought I heard voices. How ghastly to be indoors to-night! It's simply glorious!" She advanced with her hand extended.

Vail felt he had never known such an incorrigible hand-shaker in the world as Enid Puryn, nor a person more exciting to his antagonistic emotions.

Older than Iris by several years, incredibly artificial in her manners and methods of life, and quite unmagnetic, she had been consistently shunned by

suitors of all degrees, yet apparently survived her disappointments with the sprightliest indifference.

She was one of those "almost" women—almost beautiful, and almost charming, but never quite up to the standard of things femininely normal. Yet she was gay and tenacious of her youth and the life that her youngers led. She was always on the go. She was amazingly independent, living her ways in a privacy and seclusion, even here with the remainder of the family, that might have seemed impossible to those who knew less of her peculiar characteristics.

"You two have not been quarreling?" she demanded, smilingly. "What is it, Julian?—something about your wonderful adventure? Tell me all about it—just what happened. Iris has been too excited, of course. What did you think? What did you do? How could anything so singular occur? What have you done with her now—the girl in the box?"

"Enid! if you please!" said Iris. "You are interrupting a discussion that was not intended to be entirely public."

Vail rather welcomed Enid than otherwise—for once.

"I am certain further discussion to-night would be quite profitless," he observed, attempting a smile. "And the matter has been so thoroughly reported there is nothing new to add." He moved again towards the door.

"Oh, but I'm not driving you away?" said Enid, regretfully. "I could never forgive myself for that. If you wish it, Julian, I'll never mention the

subject again. You see I couldn't know, of course, whether it appealed to you as a joke or a tragedy."

"You are very kind," said Vail. "The point is still undecided."

Enid showed her animation in a smile.

"Oh, good! That's so much more interesting! Don't you think so, Iris?"

Iris was hardly more mollified than before.

"I agree with Mr. Vail it is not a topic for this sort of discussion. I think I mentioned we were talking privately."

"Oh, I didn't overlook the former hint," was Enid's good-natured rejoinder. "But when Julian seemed to be going——"

"He was not!" Iris interrupted.

"I beg your pardon," said Vail, "by your leave, I think I shall. My nerves, I find, are a little on edge from overstrain of birthday attentions."

"There!" said Enid. "I think it's horrid of them all—everyone who has heckled you about it! I was going to ask you when we could have another game of chess."

"Not to-night," said Vail, who had singularly enough enjoyed not a few of these engagements with the peculiar Miss Puryn, whose play had a worthy craft and far-reaching subtlety about it. "I should make no worthy showing at the game."

"Oh, yes, you would! but I should be so selfish to ask it," Enid answered, sympathetically. "Good-night. I trust all else may prove to be nothing but a joke." She gave him a clinging, friendly grasp

and departed from the room, leaving him not ungrateful for a view of her nature he had never heretofore suspected.

Iris had resumed a certain hauteur that never increased her charm.

"I think you understand my attitude and the only decision possible from my point of view in this affair," she told him, coldly. "I appreciate your generosity towards the apparently helpless, but I warn you, Julian, not to strain my patience too far."

"Thank you, both for the appreciation and the warning," he answered. "I am sure we shall both be wiser to drop the subject for to-night."

Despite her further insistence and a final effort to compel him to promise that Miss Lee should be promptly dismissed from their lives, he presently made his escape without provoking a positive breach of their relationship—and was once more alone with his troubles.

He knew not where to go or what to do. Aimlessly he wandered down the Avenue again, concentrating all his thoughts on the day's occurrences and questioning his inmost heart, that his will no longer swayed.

It was not until he reached the glare of Forty-second Street and turned to follow its blazing lights to Broadway, yet more brilliant on beyond, that he awoke to his actual surroundings.

"All about the ruby murder!" shrilled a tired, monotonous voice where a newsboy vended his wares, and, turning involuntarily, Vail beheld the latest

findings in the case. A line of red that stared him in the face read simply:

"UNKNOWN WOMAN LEAVES A SIGN OF GUILT!"

And the sign was reproduced in a six-inch picture of the print of a woman's thumb.

He bought the sheet and, halting close to a lighted window, scanned the printed columns with an unnamed dread at his heart.

The account gave him nothing essentially new beyond the fact that the print of a thumb, declared by experts on the case to be that of a woman, had been found on a blood-smeared panel in the house where the Indian Prince had met his end.

Vail stuffed the paper in his pocket and continued on to the crowded tides of Broadway, down which, still without purpose, he turned to wander as before.

If the *Star* had served no better purpose, it had planted a haunting worry in his mind respecting the ruby, so artlessly concealed at his office. A thousand fears of its discovery assailed him. The janitress who cleaned the place had once knocked that tall brass shell from the desk and spilled out all its water. Should such an accident happen again——

He glanced at a clock before a shop. The hour was barely half-past ten. It might not be impossible to get to his office now, at once, though the building's main entrance would be closed.

A new impatience seized him, a wild desire to take that ruby from the vase and drop it somewhere in

the street. He hailed a cab and was driven down the thoroughfare at a pace that seemed but crawling, though the driver lost little time.

The door at the side of the building was open and a watchman permitted him to enter. Excited and eager, Vail was presently striding down an echoing hall with the dimmest light to give him guidance.

He opened his private door, went in, switched on the light—and stood there motionless with astonishment.

The place had been entered and robbed!

Every drawer and cabinet the place contained had been emptied of its contents, which were scattered all over the floor. The safe was standing open, its compartments stripped of all that they had held.

Vail, with a sudden divination of the meaning of it all, ran forward to the yawning iron box. There he paused while a clammy perspiration broke out upon his brow.

Barbara's shoes were gone!

CHAPTER VIII

BAFFLING ANSWERS AND A FLIGHT

OUT of all the confusion of his mind Vail presently conjured a single hope, that was doomed to immediate extinction.

He hoped the thieves had found and taken the ruby.

They had not. When he moved across the room to his desk and took up the tall brass vase to give it a shake, the great red gem reposing in the water at the bottom rattled sharply against the metal walls.

He put the shell in place again, afraid to throw the stone away or take it from the room. He realized it was hidden as all the skill of the shrewdest thief could not have planned. It was here so nearly lying in one's plain sight that no one, searching his possessions, would ever be likely to find it.

Automatically, and as one who refuses to badger his brains with further futile puzzling, he stooped to the floor and gathered up his scattered documents, returning each bundle to its place. A hurried survey of the papers convinced him at once that nothing strictly his own had been purloined. In fact, there was every possible evidence that the thief or thieves had made a wild and hasty search for the shoes, and

having found them in the safe—which he himself had left unlocked—had snatched them and hurriedly fled.

The outer offices, where securities and money were available to anyone with the skill to crack a second safe, had apparently not been entered.

How he passed the remainder of the night Vail never knew. So utterly complete appeared the indictment of Barbara Lee—who alone was aware that her shoes had been placed in his iron box for keeping—that he closed his mind and gave up all effort to think.

He did not, however, surrender hope. He remembered afterwards, dimly, that he worked for perhaps an hour in the office, restoring the last little item to the order so rudely disturbed, primarily to conceal the facts of the burglarizing enterprize from Broughton and the others of his force, who would come there in the morning.

If nothing were reported, either to the city police or the authorities of the building, not only might the criminal eventually reveal himself, but no one else could possibly suspect Miss Lee or connect her with the ruby. That the person now in possession of the shoes must already have discovered the absence of the ruby from the hollowed heel was certain. That another and perhaps more thorough effort to retake the missing stone would eventually be made he could entertain no doubt.

All these and a thousand reflections more the man had finally taken with him to his bed. And conceding

at last that, though the day had been like an age in length, he had nevertheless known Miss Lee considerably less than twenty-four hours after all, he summoned some sort of philosophy to his aid and fell asleep. His last waking thought was focused on the ruby, still undisturbed in the vase.

His chapter of trials and adventures was only well begun.

The morning, however, found him well restored to the resourcefulness and power that had made him what he was. He told himself that sentiment should have no further part in the work that he must do. He was fully aware he had handicapped himself from the outset of the matter by what he now deemed an overnice consideration of the girl who was sent him as a gift. So long as he continued this sentimental protection of Miss Lee, he was powerless to invoke the aid of police, a private detective, or ordinary reason.

It was the cold, disillusioned man of business, purged of all romance by the night, that faced the mystery now and took appraisement of the dangers that lurked for himself in the case. Yet when he thought that perhaps the shoes had been left at his office through the arts of a clever young woman, and that, later, Barbara had possibly shammed the delirium in which she cast her arms about his neck, his whole chivalrous being rose in revolt and cried shame to such suspicions.

To clear up the matter involving himself, Miss Lee, and the ruby had become an important business

necessity. The affair was far too sinister of aspect to permit of the slightest neglect. A terrible crime had been committed; and the hounds of the law were already on the trails, of which one led to his office.

He breakfasted normally and appeared at his office at nine. There was nothing at the place to show for the burglary of which he alone was aware. Twenty minutes after his arrival Detective Garrison telephoned to confirm Miss Puryn's appointment.

"Don't let me butt into this business unless I can be useful," said the voice of the criminologist over the wire. "You have only to hint that the matter is entirely private to——"

"Not at all," interrupted Vail. "I shall be more than glad to see you."

"Look for me, then, before eleven," Garrison requested. "I have very important work that will keep me about an hour."

Vail went through his mail in a superficial manner. Leaving instructions with Broughton to call him on the telephone at Mrs. Loomis's, should occasion arise within the hour, he departed at once for the house where Barbara was domiciled, warning himself to exercise the utmost caution in all that he said and did. From the outside entrance of the building he was shadowed all the way by a well-dressed man, whose attentions entirely escaped his observation.

Despite the fact that Julian had armed himself with iron resolution, he felt his heart becoming irresponsible the moment he came to the presence of his dainty little "Gift of the Gods."

One of his roses she wore upon her breast. All its beauty, however, paled into insignificance in the light of her girlish smile. He had never in his life beheld a smile so radiant, so artlessly glad, so surprised in sweet revelations of the happiness born in a lonely heart that finds itself befriended and fostered at last.

She was as exquisite as all that rose's fragrance, as lovely as one of its petals, as she stood there in the sunlight that streamed in so clearly at the window.

She was such an embodiment of color, with the brown of her eyes, the deep bronze red of her hair, and the cream and rose of her cheeks! Her gaze met Vail's with the frankest trust—and something far deeper than friendship.

In that moment's encounter there was vastly more eloquence of heart to heart than the words of all tongues could utter. There were things too deep for comprehension—things that neither, by the utmost will, could ever retract, should either so desire, no matter what might follow. Vail tossed upon the couch a morning paper he had brought, with a full account of the "Ruby Crime."

Then Barbara came a little forward, holding forth her hand.

"Oh," she said, happily, "I haven't thought of any way to thank you, much as I've tried!"

"Oh, yes, you have!" he answered. "You're restored—you're happy—at least you seem—— You're more like yourself this morning?"

He took her hand. The mists shrank abashed from his mind. Some mighty exaltation seized him and bore him aloft and he grasped for a hold on his calmer, steadier reason.

"I know I haven't the slightest right to feel so—feel——" She stammered, and she flushed to the roots of her hair. "Perhaps it's having a friend that makes—— You know I've had so few."

A lump came instantly in Julian's throat, he hardly knew the reason why.

"You have all the right in the world to all the happiness that friendship or anything brings," he assured her, fervently. Then he felt her little fingers slip away from his with a sense of irreparable loss. "I came for a few minutes only," he added, forcing himself once more to face the stern realities by which they were confronted. "I felt I must ask a few more questions—to clear up our little mystery."

"If I could only really help you!" she answered, moving towards a chair. "I wish to do all I can." The color had left her face again, however, to return less gloriously. She forced herself to meet his gaze. "Has—anything else occurred?"

Vail noted the question and the hesitation with which her lips pronounced it. He wondered how far she might be acquainted with the burglary of his office.

He chose for the moment to ignore her inquiry.

"I want you to try to remember all about the woman who met you at the train," he said, quietly. "Also the house to which you were taken, and what

you ate, and how long it was before you fell asleep, to wake at last in my office."

She seemed relieved to escape a more personal inquisition.

"Why, the woman—Mrs. Cree—was just an ordinary person, although I imagine her hair was bleached, for her skin was very dark."

"Was she large, or small?"

"She was just of medium size. She was wearing a veil when she met me, and kept it on part of her face, even at luncheon. But about the house there was something queer—or perhaps it was all a dream."

"It was not an ordinary house?"

She appeared to make an effort to solidify a lot of filmy impressions in her mind.

"It may be part of my fancy.—I'm sorry nothing comes back very clearly, no matter how I try.—But I'm almost sure there were iron men—— Oh, but that's absurd! It might have been a room full of old armor, though I never saw an armor in my life—nothing more than a picture—but it must have been that, or just a part of a dream."

Vail leaned forward, tense with interest.

"You think you saw a room filled with armor—or iron men? Was that before or after lunch?"

Her eyes were focused dreamily on emptiness. She passed her hand across her forehead.

"I wish I could remember clearly, but I can't."

"Not even what you ate? Was there anything that tasted peculiar?"

"Oh, the coffee was very bad, indeed!"

"And you said you came to New York on Friday, just before noon?"

"No, on Saturday."

He knew she had told him Saturday before, but had taken this means of verifying her former statement. He could not avoid the conviction she was telling him the truth, yet all this business of the ruby and her shoes was an unlaid ghost that he must down.

"Now, about your father," he said, watching her face narrowly. "Did he leave you practically destitute? Was his business such that nothing could be saved?"

Her uneasiness became apparent immediately.

"He—he left nothing—I'm afraid—unless it might be some papers that I haven't been able to find, though he said—— Do you suppose I can ever find my trunk again?"

"I hope so," said Vail, intent upon following up the subject of her father. "We'll see about that later. Was invention Mr. Lee's only profession? Did he make his living by inventions?"

She was plainly distressed.

"He—he had some other means of securing—— Is it very helpful to talk about my father?"

"Would you rather we would not?"

She looked at him appealingly.

"Until I can get my trunk—— I've thought it might have a secret recess somewhere. He may have meant to direct me to something of the kind, and

until I know—— I thought you only cared to solve the mystery about the box—and me—who sent me, and what it means?"

"I do," he said, once more leaning forward, more anxious to establish her innocence than anything in all the world. "I need your help—and your trust. Is there anything you feel you must conceal respecting your father?"

The look of anguish and worry in her eyes was unmistakable.

"Oh, I don't know!—I mean—— No! No! There mustn't be! There couldn't be!" she cried. "Please wait a little—please! Why must we talk of him now?"

"Because a detective is to call on me at eleven, and I want all the facts I can get." He saw her pale and yet he continued, for the good of all concerned. "You see, very serious consequences may result to me, and to you, from what has already occurred. In self-protection, I am now obliged to sift this thing to the bottom."

"A detective?" she repeated, in obvious alarm. "Has anything else—anything new—happened—since yesterday?"

"What else could happen?" he inquired, fearing for guilty knowledge she might betray at last.

She arose and turned to the window.

"Oh, I don't know.—But—things might.—If anything should happen to you through me——" She turned to face him, candidly. "Believe me, I am more than grateful, Mr. Vail—but—you'd want

me to be loyal to my father! Oh, I mean—— I don't know what I mean—but I couldn't permit him—— Oh, if I'd only stayed at home and found the papers!"

Vail's distress was almost equal to her own, so insistent and unrelenting was his demand that she should be guiltless.

He could do no less than continue, in justice to them both. Some way, despite it all, she had become more dear, more precious to him than very life itself, and yet he felt that he must know precisely what she was before he could face the criminologist, presently due at his office.

"Barbara, what is it you expect those papers to establish?"

Some joy that leaped in her bosom at the sound of her name on his lips subsided in a tremor of fear at the sternness of his query.

"How should I know?" she answered. "How could I possibly know?"

"It is something that perhaps you fear?"

Tears sprang abruptly from her eyes.

"Oh, please don't make me say so, when I've tried so hard to think—— I know, I know that he was good—the best, the kindest father in the world! And if I should find out something—some secret he kept—I'd keep it if it killed me on the spot!" She turned away to suppress a sob, that broke despite her efforts.

"There, there," said Vail, afflicted by a sense that, while she was doubtless innocent of anything that

might have happened, she was perhaps concealing the guilt of her father, "I wouldn't worry to-day. I shouldn't have bothered you like this if it weren't——"

The door was opened abruptly, and Mrs. Loomis thrust in her head and shoulders.

"You're wanted on the 'phone, Mr. Vail," she announced. "Shall I ask them to give me the message?"

"I'll come," said Vail. He went to the instrument and answered Broughton's call.

"I thought perhaps you ought to know at once," his man informed him, "that someone in the Street is selling B. & K. C. rather heavily. The price has broken badly. Will you give an order to support the market?"

"No," said Vail. "Close up that option on Green's ten thousand shares. Wire Charlie in Boston to pick up everything there, and give Shears and Shears order number thirty-one. They'll understand."

For perhaps five minutes he stood there, completing his instructions. His face was grim when he hung the receiver in place. So Gardner was out to get him on B. & K. C. already! From what had Gardner concluded that these new affairs might so engross a rival's time that his business plans must suffer? The subject was dropped temporarily, for reflection later on. There was nothing more vital at the present moment than to continue with Barbara and test her with the announcement of the theft

from his safe of her shoes. Should that, he determined, have no effect, he would next inform her of the ruby and all its possession implied.

He returned to the room, and found it empty. A door that led to a room beyond was standing open. The paper he had flung upon the couch lay spread in the center of the floor.

He was certain Miss Lee would return at once, but after a minute of waiting in vain he went to the open door, gave a knock, and peered within, to find the apartment deserted.

Someone was coming down the stairs from the floor above. He went to the hall. It was Mrs. Loomis. She had neither seen nor heard the girl since glancing in at the door.

Five minutes of thorough searching disclosed the fact she was not within the house. Mrs. Loomis even ran to the door that led to the street, but was disappointed there.

Barbara had vanished. She had evidently taken one brief glance at the paper's account of the ruby crime and instantly fled the scene.

"Why, she can't be far," said Mrs. Loomis, calmly. "She went out last night to the drug store and was back in twenty minutes."

"What!" said Vail. "She went out last night—while she was lame?"

"Oh, her foot was better right away," said the unsuspicious Mrs. Loomis. "But, now that I think of it, I certainly believe I heard a whistle last night and this morning, a sort of a Bob-white whistle—

and I was almost sure she came back last night with a man."

Vail felt a sinking at his vitals. To remain in the house another minute seemed more than he could endure.

"Oh, well, then—that's all right," he said, as if the affair were one of preconceived arrangement. "I'll hustle along myself."

But when he was out in the sunlight, mechanically heading for his office, he paused to look at a hundred passing beings, as if to demand of any busied stranger if he had seen Miss Barbara Lee that way, and noted where she had gone.

CHAPTER IX

THE HOUSE OF CRIME

WHEN he finally returned to his office, Vail discovered that Garrison had barely that moment arrived.

Garrison had never appeared more keen or eagerly absorbed in the science to which he was devoted. Like Vail he was young, smooth-shaven, athletically constructed, and exceptionally equipped with brains and courage.

Indeed, they made a striking pair of clean-cut men of the hour, each exemplifying strength, resourcefulness, and honor in an unusual degree. As they faced each other now across the desk, with the tall brass cartridge-shell between them, they assumed relations entirely different from anything heretofore developed since their social encounter abroad.

Vail rehearsed his story briefly and clearly—except where it touched upon the ruby. Concerning the shoe with the hollowed heel, the gem, and later mysteries he could not bring himself to speak, in his conflict of doubts and hopes.

Garrison nodded from time to time, and asked a number of questions. He arose at last, and going to the empty box, still leaning against the wall, examined it briefly but minutely.

"My position in this matter is peculiar," he presently observed, returning to his chair. "Miss Puryn, having first requested my services, disarms me in one direction, while you, in accepting me now on the case, embarrass me in the other."

Vail looked at him quickly.

"Just precisely what does that mean?"

Garrison smiled.

"We may as well be frank. To be quite candid, it appeared to me Miss Puryn possibly wished me to gather an impression that you might have had this birthday 'present' delivered to yourself. I may be mistaken, of course."

"I see," said Julian. "And now it perhaps occurs to you that it's just the other way about, and Miss Puryn herself may have had a hand in the matter?"

"You jump at swift conclusions," Garrison laughed. "I have formed no actual theories. This has been an expensive business, preparing and delivering your 'Gift of the Gods.' Someone with an exceptionally powerful motive must have been behind the adventure.—Gardner might possess such a motive. You are engaged to the lady, and you own the road he has sworn he'd make his own. He called here suspiciously soon. Still that may signify nothing. I am merely groping for the motive—and the person or persons who would benefit most by your embarrassment or even your business disorganization."

Julian nodded. He had formulated all these thoughts for himself, in nearly this logical sequence.

"You have methods of ferreting out this sort of thing," he said. "Perhaps you'd not mind telling me the first thing you shall do?"

"Discover, if possible, who made this box, and by whose orders; inquire concerning Miss Lee and her father in Hartford; interview the young lady herself, and get a line——"

"Miss Lee has gone out this morning, and left no word as to where she would be, or when she might return."

"That's all right," said Garrison, "unless she has run away;" and he smiled. "In that event we'll have to find her. It's important to know whether or not she consented to the plan, or was a victim. Meantime we have all we can handle for a day or two, though I shall put a number of men at work and I may have something to report before——"

The 'phone bell interrupted. Vail took the instrument in hand.

"Hullo!" he said. "Hullo. Yes, this is . . . Oh, how are you, Faxon? . . . Yes, he's here—just——" He turned to the criminologist, giving him the instrument. "This is for you, Mr. Garrison—Chief of Police on the wire."

Garrison leaned far back in his chair and applied the receiver to his ear.

"Hello!" he said. "How are you, Chief? . . . No, there's nothing I wish to report this morning. . . . No trace of the ruby or other stones up to date. I felt very sure . . . Yes, I'm going up there

now. I prefer to examine the house alone. . . . If you want me to work on this case, old man, keep everybody off except the men for whom I made a requisition. I can't make good in any other way. . . . Yes, I'll let you know the minute I get a line. . . . I'll call you up at four this afternoon. . . . Good-by."

Vail was regarding him fixedly as he returned the stand to the desk.

"You've been engaged on this Gatama ruby case —the robbery and murder?"

"By luck, good or ill, I have." Garrison arose from his chair. "I'm due at the scene of it now, before the regular force of blunderers succeeds in obliterating every possible clew. I shall not neglect your little affair, however, and may have some news——"

"I'd like to go along," Vail interrupted. "I mean to the house where the murder was committed. Should I be very much in the way? I've a very particular reason—— I mean perhaps I might be able to help—— I've got a notion it's a house where I was once a guest. If it is—— Anyway, Mr. Garrison, I'd like, if possible, to go."

Garrison looked at him sharply.

"I should be glad to have you along."

Julian rose at the second when, with a knock on the door, Broughton came in with a telegram, only that moment delivered. Hoping for a moment that it might be a line from Barbara, Vail tore it roughly open.

It came from Iris Puryn.

"I trust in new excitement you have not forgotten Comity Ball to-night, and obligation. Please reply."

Vail had, as a matter of fact, entirely forgotten the ball to which he and his fiancée were committed. He handed the message to Broughton.

"Answer for me, 'All right.' And I wish you'd make up a statement, Broughton, of all the outstanding shares of B. & K. C., with the names of those who hold them, even to the smallest blocks, and place it on my desk."

He and Garrison were presently emerging from the building together. They boarded a hired automobile the criminologist had kept in waiting at the curb. It turned to the north, up the Avenue, swung in behind the tall, gray Flatiron building at Twenty-second Street, and thence, by Broadway and Twenty-third Street, skirted Madison Square, hummed beneath the shadow of the mighty Metropolitan tower, and on past the much-beloved Madison Square Garden, avoiding the traffic further to the west and making good time to their goal.

Time was when the neighborhood between Twenty-third and Forty-second streets, to the east of Madison Avenue, was one of Gotham's splendor. To-day the remnants of the grandeur still remain, while encroachments of the city's less æsthetic classes render much of the region a field of violent contrasts and glaring incongruities.

The particular street where the crime had been committed was surprisingly lifeless this morning.

Fully half a dozen old-time houses, inhospitable and uniform in their brown-stone fronts, were boarded up and closed. It was one of these to which the murdered man had been lured for his life and his gems.

Garrison's car was halted in front of the door. The chauffeur was instructed to wait. The criminologist had a key to which the scarred old barrier yielded, and he and Julian entered where their footsteps echoed through the empty halls, while the smell of old dust filled their nostrils.

"Here's a little electric torch," said Garrison, tendering Julian the useful implement, "for some of the rooms are dark, though we've opened up many of the windows. Shall you mind conducting your explorations independently of me?"

"Not at all," said Vail. "I trust you'll not permit me to interfere with your work in the least."

He was shown the room where the body was found, and then the apartment, one flight up, where a former drawing-room had been made almost habitable in spite of the dust and disorder.

Some manner of hope—or fear—rather vague and indistinct, that Barbara's trunk might be found upon the premises had prompted Vail's visit to the place. He was particularly grateful for Garrison's hint that he wander through the house alone.

In one old chamber there were trunks of all ages and sizes. They were fairly clothed in ancient mold, and were doubtless empty, since all bore signs of

recent examination and one stood gaping open, as hollow as a well.

It was rather a melancholy and unprofitable business, after all, this quest that had brought him to the scene. Up to the garret Julian climbed, while Garrison studied that living-room with concentrated particularity. Then the cellar alone remained unexplored, and to it Vail descended.

It, too, had been searched before, the coal-bin, laundry, and the former vaults for wine bearing dusty indications of recent visitors.

There were still a number of shelves for bottles, an empty cask, and countless hoops and staves upon the floor, in the place where the wines had one time been, while all about the cavern-like place rough panels finished the walls. One loosely hooped keg reposed on a rack above the ordinary shelves. The place was dimly lighted by the merest iron-barred square of glass, set high above the floor and frosted by ancient cobwebs.

Vail entered, and a huge, gray rat leaped fairly from beneath his feet, to run in confusion against his leg and scamper away in the shadows. Involuntarily the man stepped back. His foot came down on an iron hoop that flipped up and struck him on the shin.

He floundered over against the rack, and there, with a clatter of dry old staves, the keg abruptly fell apart, one of its oaken units striking Julian a violent blow in the face. He reeled heavily, and collided, as he thought, with the paneled wall, but felt

something give to his weight and then plunged, stumbling headlong, into cold and Stygian darkness.

He struck at last on his head, sprawled on some dusty floor. His torch was shattered. He lay there, partially stunned for a moment, and, when he arose, groped blindly and dazedly about in the velvet-like gloom, meeting with nothing but solid walls wherever his hands explored.

He realized at once he must have found some second chamber of the cellar, into which, as he sought to regain his balance, he must have pitched for several yards. Ashamed to shout for Garrison, and aware he might not be heard, he searched in his pockets for a match, discovered he had not so much as a single one, and began to feel his way along the wall to discover the door where he had entered.

He groped thus uncertainly for a distance he was sure should fetch him to the entrance leading to the old-time winery, in vain. In a rapidly increasing fever of impatience, he hastened onward, feeling now with feet as well as hands, where never the slightest ray of light was admitted to penetrate the absolute darkness of the place.

He presently feared he was moving about in a circle—that the chamber must have been built without a corner, and the door he sought be too much like the rough-board finish of the hole for his hands to discover the exit.

As a matter of fact, he had passed the door and a corner that slanted from the opening to a long narrow passageway beyond. He was moving away

from the winery now, in his effort to come upon some lock or hinge that would indicate the spring-closed opening on which he had fallen by chance.

He had made his way fully fifty feet from the place of his accident when at length he heard a muffled sound. It was off to his left, which convinced him he had moved in a circle. That Garrison had heard the disturbance made when the keg was shattered, and that he was coming to assist him, he was more than merely hopeful. Moving ahead more rapidly, in the direction indicated by the distant sound, he traversed several additional rods of the passage—and paused abruptly as his foot collided with something solid in his path.

He stooped to feel of this obstruction. It proved to be a step. Above it was another—and a third. He recognized it with something like a shocked surprise as a staircase, winding spirally up from the floor. Confused to the last degree, thus to discover he had wandered, heaven alone knew how far, from the cellar where Garrison might have sought him, he surrendered all hope of retracing his steps, and welcomed the stairs as a means of deliverance that great good fortune had provided.

He began to climb at once, halting from time to time to wave his hand above his head for fear of striking a ceiling. He hardly expected to ascend for more than a dozen feet and emerge perhaps in a kitchen. But the stairs went up with no apparent end, till fully the height of two ordinary flights were passed, and still he found no end.

When he came at last to the landing at the top, he was walled about completely, in a well as black as ink. Then, as his hands moved here and there, searching for anything that might suggest a break in this *cul-de-sac*, he struck a little lock at last and tugged and rattled at the door.

He could slip the catch, yet the door appeared to be immovable. He worked at the thing impatiently. He called, but heard no sound. Yet Garrison, he thought, must be not far away.

At length, as one result of his shaking at the barrier, a tiny crack of daylight appeared along its jamb. With a sudden devination of his error, he gave the thing a sideways push, and the door slid back with ease.

He stepped at once into a dimly lighted room—and the door, by which he had escaped, glided back through some application of his weight to the boards of the floor. It became the merest panel, in a wainscoted room, and not even Vail, in his astonished scrutiny, could detect a sign of its existence.

He faced about. The room was one he had never seen before. He still retained the impression he was under that self-same roof where Garrison had bid him explore by himself. He knew he had made a discovery that might prove of great significance.

"Hey, there—Garrison!" he called, and started for an open door that led to apartments beyond.

Below he heard a door firmly slam, and was sure it was Garrison, going. He ran from the room, then through a hall, and was darting past a lofty cham-

ber when suddenly something in his heart stood still and his brain got a jolt of surprise.

The chamber was a room of iron men!

His vision comprehended the picture of six or more full-sized figures in armor, solemnly arrayed against the wall, like steel-clad guards of a tomb.

It was Barbara's room—but what did it mean—with that passage that led——

There was someone on the stairs!

"Garrison! Garrison!" he shouted suddenly, running onward as before.

But a curse and a stifled cry responded from below, then sounds of a sudden retreat.

He reached the head of the stairs, looked down—and was speechless with what he saw.

It was Barbara, staring wildly up, as she turned in the arms of a man. Then man and girl plunged madly down to the hall below, while a muffled cry startled the silence.

Vail descended the groaning staircase two and three steps at a leap. The outside door was slammed when he was halfway down the flight.

He was there in a moment, but the lock had snapped and he fumbled and raged to get it open.

At length he wrenched it backward and was out—in time to see Barbara hurled inside a limousine car at the door, and the man leap in beside her.

Vail yelled at the driver and ran to head him off, but the fellow was coasting down the slope and he dropped in his clutch and shifted his gears with expert alacrity.

With Vail still chasing at the wheel, a dusty, wild figure of activity, the big machine leaped madly on its course and presently shot around the corner. Racing full-speed for Garrison's car, Julian flung himself in beside the waiting chauffeur and shoved up his throttle and spark.

"Catch him! Catch that car!" he cried. "Don't let him get out of your sight!"

CHAPTER X

A RACE IN THE STREETS

THE astonished driver responded mechanically, without the snap or ginger that interest might have supplied.

His car was started with a jerk and picked up its speed too slowly. He turned his questioning eyes on Vail with some half-formed doubt in his mind.

"Speed up! Speed up!" cried Julian, desperately. "Get going, man, or you'll lose them in a block! Catch them! Never mind the law! I'll pay the fines if we're arrested!"

Down the slight declivity they bumped and rattled hotly, the dull chauffeur aroused by this to exhibit his prowess at the wheel.

Down into Lexington Avenue and around the corner they whipped like the fragment of a comet rounding the curve of its orbit. They were barely in time to see the limousine ahead skid recklessly about the corner below, careening onward towards busy, congested Third Avenue, further to the east, with its car-lines, its posts of the elevated structure, and its swarming population to complicate the race.

There was nothing by then to be seen of Barbara

or her companion, in the glimpse vouchsafed of the car. But at least they were not far ahead.

The big machine that Vail had seized now delivered a deafening roar where its muffler cut-out was opened. It appeared to leap in exultation in its liberated power.

A man with an armful of parcels started to cross its deadly path, but was mercifully halted in time. He danced an eccentric fandango that scattered his bundles far and wide, then fled to the safety of the curb.

The corner was reached not a second too soon. The car ahead, with luck all its way, had found Third Avenue almost clear for its swing to the downtown tracks. It, too, was belching a gatling's detonations and a blinding cloud of fume.

Half a minute later Vail and his man were likewise in the Avenue, shooting madly down the gleaming rails, in the wake of the limousine. Yells, curses, and even a cheer arose from the scattering pedestrians of the street who beheld the fury of the race.

Straight on, through the double peristyle of iron pillars, past crosstown streets pouring in their traffic, and heading for a huge yellow surface car ahead, the two mighty engines of speed and steel were hurtling with increasing velocity.

The fellow ahead was a demon. He fairly jumped the rails at last, to dart with consummate skill about the car and drive like a monster projectile through a narrow space between the iron pillars and a loaded wagon, standing near the curb.

Julian groaned. He saw the traffic closing there, where the limousine had passed. The car beneath him snarled like an angry beast as it cringed to the biting of the brake.

But, like a hollow in the fog, the wagons and people melted away, uncovering an opening into which they drove the wind-splitting front of the motor. Once more they beheld the machine that led the chase. It had gained perceptibly, and was going like some crazed ambassador of a cyclone, clearing its path by the terror it inspired.

It flung itself unscathed through the crosstown ebb and flow of trolleys, trucks, cabs, and automobiles at Thirty-fourth Street, and was swallowed from sight almost immediately after the streams that flow in both directions resumed their interrupted surge.

Down on this living wall of human beings, horses, and vehicles Julian's driver swept—to meet defeat. The barrier of life was more impassable than one of roaring flame. At its very edge the car was brought to an absolute halt, while the limousine, now far beyond, trailed its woof of smoke and terror through the warp of streets and men like a shuttle of fate that blindly moves, regardless of the pattern left behind.

It seemed an age before the way through the crosstown stream was opened. The driver then, at Julian's urging, sped as before down the Avenue, hoping to recover lost ground.

Vail was certain he could yet discern the machine

he must overtake. But a street-car's bulk, more crossing trucks, and moving masses of humanity, obstructed and confused the vista down the two long rows of pillars, and nothing was definite beyond.

More yells, the cries of a baffled and useless policeman, and staring crowds lent incidents that rapidly sped rearward in the flight, and Julian urged more speed. Then, when at length a clearer opening was once more made ahead, he found himself staring at empty tracks and road, with never a sign of the limousine, which he knew must have turned aside at last and escaped to a crosstown street.

There was nothing to do save drive ahead and scrutinize the thoroughfares they passed, in a feeble hope of catching sight of the vanished car with the girl. There was, however, absolutely no means in the world of ascertaining whether the fellow with Barbara had turned to the right or left. And, before they came to Twenty-third Street, Julian acknowledged defeat.

Not another sign of the car had they seen—and he knew they never should. Impatiently and disgustedly, pausing at last to wonder what it meant thus to find Miss Lee and her abductor in the house of iron men, Vail reluctantly ordered the driver to face about and return where Garrison was working.

They crossed into Lexington Avenue, thereby avoiding the belated pursuit of a mounted officer, and arrived in good season before the house of crime. But Garrison had gone. There was no response to Julian's knocking on the door, and at last he

turned away to be driven once more to his office. He had ample time for careful thinking of all he had discovered and how much it were wise to reveal.

He did not, however, hesitate to telephone Garrison's office. Some clerk in charge replied, informing him Garrison had not returned and could not be found by the wire. Then at length Vail took a brush from a drawer and removed the dust from his clothing.

When he finally sat once more at his desk, facing the tall brass vase that held the ruby, he was far more at sea than ever before, and far more obsessed by doubts.

Barbara's disappearance of the morning and the sight of her there in the house to which a secret passage led from a scene of murder, as foul as ever a crime could be, seemed more than all his logic could explain away, despite her cry upon the stairs, which had seemed like a call for help.

Yet to that cry he clung with a stubbornness incredible. If she had not gone to the premises voluntarily, if even now she were held a captive, looking to himself for her deliverance, what a wholly different aspect the entire affair would assume! But had she cried to him for assistance, or merely in fright at seeing him there, where no one could have been expected? He was greatly annoyed that he had not seen the face of the man she was with. He only knew the fellow was large and his hair was fiery red.

He felt the need of help—but where should aid be found? How could he share the blackest of his

suspicions with Garrison—relate all he knew of the ruby and what had happened since? No one save himself could conceive or entertain a hope of Barbara's innocence—and no one else would greatly care.

The ways of love are strange, mad ways—and the love that had come unbidden to his heart was the strongest, blindest emotion that Vail had ever undergone. It refused to be shaken or to die. It conjured new hopes where logic shrank abashed, and would not let them go. It hungered for Barbara, championed her honor, fretted his soul with impatience, and suffered acutely for his doubts.

A thousand times he wondered where she was, and a thousand times he questioned what it was she was hiding from his ken. It seemed impossible her male companion could have dragged her unwillingly into the house where he had met them on the stairs—in the glaring light of day.

That the house was the same she had previously described there could be not a shadow of doubt. The room containing the armor was unmistakable. Moreover, it could scarcely be duplicated in a hundred years, in Greater New York.

What was the sinister relation between the girl and the crime worked out so short a space away? He dimly recalled that on his hasty exit from the place he had noted that the house of iron men stood three or four doors removed from the one where the body had been found. The secret passage must, therefore, be fully a hundred feet long—an older-day tunnel

connecting the houses for uses that would never be divulged.

He wondered who owned the tenantless house where the men of iron stood. He wondered also if Garrison had found that passageway, with the panels at either end. What had the criminologist thought when he found his car and companion vanished from the scene?

Vail got up and paced the floor. He needed Garrison. He likewise felt he must inform him, at least, of what he had found and done. He fretted there for an hour, calling the detective's office repeatedly, to no avail. He telephoned Mrs. Loomis no less often, always to learn that Barbara had not returned.

He ate no lunch. The afternoon was consumed with business of the B. & K. C. R. R., which Gardner was viciously attacking. No news developed either of Barbara or Garrison. The day was a long and futile session of impatience. Darkness brought no change. And at last he once more remembered the Comity Ball to which Iris expected to be taken.

CHAPTER XI

THE COMITY BALL

WITH a feeling that was anything save festive or gay, Vail ascended the stairs at the gorgeous Puryn mansion at nine o'clock in the evening. At the final minute he had sent a box of flowers, for the first time forgotten in more than a year that he had paid his court to Iris.

He was somewhat abashed at the thought of his neglect, so tardily corrected. The feeling he had undergone in sending these roses to Iris was in startling contrast with the emotions experienced at buying American beauties for Barbara, despite the protest of duty.

His longing for Barbara was not to be diminished; the dread of his spirit at thought of an evening at the ball with Iris at his side was not to be escaped.

Then presently, while he waited in the golden reception-room adjoining Iris's suite, surprise number one of the evening came to pass. One of the servants entered to announce that his fiancée had been taken ill, within the last few minutes, and might be unable to go.

Vail was genuinely sympathetic. He was doubly distressed to think his attitude had been impatient

and cold, and that possibly a nervous complication had arisen out of this mysterious affair to assist in making Iris ill.

In the midst of his uncertainty Enid appeared, to alter the aspect of the evening.

"Oh, Julian," she said, "I never was in such a quandary. Iris seems far too ill to leave the house. She declares it is nothing serious, and I suppose she knows. But she cannot think of going to the ball, and insists I shall take her place. I've protested that such an arrangement might not be in the least acceptable to you—that you would never have asked me to accept such an honor, and that you are certain to be chagrined and embarrassed by any such proposal, but——"

"Not at all," interrupted Julian, far more indifferent to the change of programme than he would have dared confess. "If that is her wish, and you consent, I am sure I am quite at your service."

"How kind you always are!" said Enid, flushing with delight. She met his gaze with inscrutable eyes that awoke some surprise in his nature. "If I could only be sure it's not your mere polite—— But why should beggars be choosers?" And she laughed, with the color still glowing in her cheeks. "Shall I tell her, then, her suggestion is accepted?"

"If you please," said Vail, still puzzled by Enid's newest phase and the look he had discovered in her glance. "And express my genuine and heartfelt regret to Iris that she is indisposed. I trust she will speedily recover. If there is anything in the world

that I can do, pray let me know. If she prefers to have me remain—if she can see me——"

"Oh, no, dear Julian, she couldn't at all!" Enid hastened to state. "She said there was nothing she cared to request, except the plan I've mentioned."

"Very well," said Vail. "We will go whenever you wish."

Enid retired for her final preparations, and when she returned was not only gowned in positive splendor—but was wearing some of his roses.

"Do you recognize these?" she asked him, shyly. "Do you mind *my* wearing them to-night?"

One answer only was permitted him, and this he murmured carelessly, still struck by her change towards himself.

His limousine car was at the door, and they were driven to the ball.

This Comity Ball, the newest and most original of Swelldom's creations, was the brilliant and daring innovation of a woman leader of the highest social set, who had frequently startled her pleasure-loving world with something unusual or bold.

It was held at one of the huge hotels well down Fifth Avenue, a hostelry far famed for its splendid appointments and nation-wide popularity. It was, in every sense of the word, an international function, to "cement the comity of nations and acquaint the representatives thereof with one another on a friendly and joyous footing."

In accordance with its purpose, it was held at New York instead of at the nation's capital, because

of the great burg's highly cosmopolitan character. And social, if not diplomatic, delegates from every considerable monarchy, empire, or republic of the world had been invited to be present, costumed wherever possible in distinguishing attire.

A more brilliant ensemble than that which populated the wonderful gold and crystal room may scarcely be imagined. It was all a marvelous kaleidoscope of color, motion, and refulgence. From the polished floor, that flung back softened reds and blacks, and mellowed gold and greens, to the ceiling, rioting in iridescent gleams and gold again, the entire hall was magnificent.

The flowers had cost a fortune. Their wealth of fragrance was tossed on every wave that ripples of laughter caused to rise and billow to the walls. The palm-room, the fountain grotto, and the cool, darkened places provided for resting and retirement from the throng, were bowers of roses or of violets, whose perfumes ravished the air.

Soft music weaved upon the atmosphere like wafting of zephyrs over meadows. Sparkle and shimmer, the twinkle of feet, and a ceaseless procession of the nations' elect became like subtle intoxicants to charm and excite the senses.

It seemed as if the whole foreign world had responded to the call for a brothering of nations. There were Russians, Germans, British officers, proud little Japanese, Turks, Hungarians, Dons from Spain, East Indian princes in their wondrous robes and turbans, men of the world's great navies, courtly

French officials, representatives from Sweden, and strangers from all corners of the earth. But more than all, for beauty, color, and animation, were the women—the belles of all the lands, in the miracles of their adornment.

Into the midst of this amazing throng Vail and Enid Puryn were projected, only to find all the friends and social acquaintances of their elected set already there to give them welcome.

The attendance was, indeed, unprecedented. Scores of new arrivals swarmed at the entrance doors below, and presently streamed upon the floor. A hundred murmurs of surprise, delight, or interest sped the rounds from time to time, as important acquisitions were added to the already brilliant attendance.

Despite it all, however, Vail was still more occupied by thoughts of the day's affairs than by anything he saw. Nevertheless, he danced with Enid and with others, in an automatic way, and the current of pleasure steadily rose to sweep him along with the others.

It was shortly after eleven o'clock when once again a murmur of excitement came to Julian's ears. Someone had come whom all the world apparently wished to see.

Despite himself, Vail partook of the curious impulse that surged throughout the room. Some woman, young and surpassingly beautiful, had just arrived, on the arm of an English peer. She and her escort swung in close to the eager group of which Vail made a unit.

A moment afterward, incredulous and rooted to

the spot by sheer astonishment, he stood there amazedly staring.

The new arrival was no other than Barbara Lee.

The man on whose arm she was resting her hand was Sir Hugh Pearson, in the service of His Majesty, King George.

A more enchanting vision of loveliness and diffidence than Barbara presented could hardly be imagined. She was color and charm incarnate. Her gown, that was cut décolleté, revealing arms and shoulders of ivory perfection, was the last and daintiest refinement of golden chiffon, over shimmering tissue of gold. Her feet were encased in golden slippers like slender little models for a queen. About her neck were diamonds of the purest ray and luster. In her hair she wore a small gold coronet, wrought in marvelous filigree, that glowed in the wealth of its setting.

Unconsciously she bore herself with a regal air, as wholly unstudied and natural as that of a rose on its stem. And yet she was timid and as unaware of her beauty and her power as when she had slipped from her imprisoning case into Julian's arms, at his office.

This much at least the man discerned, as he watched her slowly approaching. He felt it in the girlish way she conversed with the man at her side. Then she caught his glance, the color mounted swiftly to her face and neck, and she moved on past like one directed in a dream.

CHAPTER XII

THE FIRES OF LOVE

HAD Vail seen a ghost he could have been no more affected. It was simply beyond all credence—a mystery as utterly confusing as anything heretofore developed in this extraordinary business. It completely disorganized every previous conception he had formed as to who and what the girl could be, shook down his faith in her story, and made chaos of matters already sufficiently entangled.

Such a chain and tissue of incongruities he could never have imagined possible. His mind refused all further effort with theories or even conjectures. He was certain of one thing only—he loved her more helplessly, more consumingly than ever before, and felt that the world and all it contained would be a meager sacrifice to fold her again in his arms—his own priceless gift of the gods!

The man was no longer fit to reason. His love made all estimate of Barbara's character impossible. He was ready to accept her in his heart as the world's one great desire, no matter what her connection with the Gatama ruby crime.

Eagerly his gaze still clung to her figure where she went. To watch, to grasp at the earliest oppor-

tunity of being formally presented, and then to touch her hand—to be near her again—this was his one real object now, and all else faded from his mind.

The matter was not susceptible of prompt or easy arrangement, despite the fact he knew Sir Hugh and observed every movement they made. Barbara's beauty had magnetized the whole young male assemblage, not to mention despairing women. She was swiftly surrounded and besieged, whenever a halt made such attentions possible. Vail was no more than anyone else in the eager stampede of men.

Enid was forgotten as Julian moved from one point of vantage to another. He was not aware of his neglect till she finally overtook him in the palm-room, to which he had gone in a baffled quest for Barbara, whom he had momentarily lost. It jarred him back to realities when Enid touched him on the arm.

"I feared you might be feeling the heat," she said, by way of explaining his behavior. "Shall we not sit down for a moment—by ourselves?"

"If you like," he answered, mechanically. "I fear I'm a trifle dull."

"Poor, dear Julian," she murmured, as she found her place beside him on a rustic bench where the light filtered softly through the shadows. "I think I can understand your disappointment in Iris—the way she behaves over somebody's harmless joke."

He stared at her blankly. "My disappointment?"

"Oh, I saw it at once," she assured him, sympa-

thetically. "I didn't blame you in the least. And for Iris to turn to Mr. Gardner now—— There! I didn't intend to betray my feelings—betray her lack of—— Forgive me, Julian, for the great concern I feel in your happiness."

He had never in his life felt more indifferent respecting Iris and Gardner than at this particular moment. Nevertheless, he aroused to a slight extent to grasp at what Enid was imparting.

"You are very kind," he told her, in a colorless tone of voice she did not understand. "Thank you for your interest, Enid, as well as your sympathy. Is Gardner here to-night?"

She glanced at him peculiarly.

"You wouldn't really expect to find him here after—— Isn't sudden illness the most convenient—— Oh, let's talk of something else! You know it isn't often the fates are so kind as this—to me."

He was startled by the look he found in her eyes, that were fixed unabashed on his own. He was distinctly uncomfortable, more especially as the hints in her speeches stirred new suspicions in his mind.

"But Iris *was* ill?" he insisted. "There can be no doubt of that?"

"I am such a poor judge," she answered, meaningly, "for in a place like hers I wouldn't have missed this evening for the world."

"Beautiful night," he murmured, "and a brilliant scene."

Her voice sank to something like a sigh.

"But I was thinking of pleasures that go far deeper than that."

Vail disliked the trend of the conversation exceedingly. He was wondering what he could say or do by way of making his escape when a new sensation of uneasiness compelled him to peer through the foliage across the dimly lighted place, where he found his gaze confronted by two sets of widely differing eyes.

One pair of eyes was as coldly gray as crockery; the others were as black as carbons. The gray eyes were those of a woman. Her companion was a swarthy East Indian, whose gaze was a penetrative stare. That both were engaged in a concentrated study either of himself or of Enid, Vail felt with a sense akin to anger.

Neither the man nor the woman had moved when Enid, abruptly following Julian's fixed attention, glanced quickly across through the leaves. Instantly she rose from her seat.

"Oh, I wonder if I hadn't promised this dance to—— Would you mind if we returned to the ballroom?" she said. "It's such a provoking thing for anyone to forget an obligation."

Vail was glad to escort her back, for his own impatience was increasing. They had hardly more than entered on the floor, however, than Enid declared she had dropped her fan, for which he went to search. The fan was not upon or near the bench. He returned to find that Enid had disappeared, greatly to his relief.

He barely escaped a collision with Sir Hugh Pearson, as he started down the hall, and half a minute later, by the fortunes of fate, was conventionally presented to Barbara, whose name, according to the English baron, was Lady Constance Drew.

He offered his arm, which she tremblingly accepted, and led her excitedly away. His heart was almost audibly pounding in his breast, while Barbara's wildly fluttered.

For a moment neither spoke, and all the room became a blur. Vail was the first to find his voice.

"What a wonderful assemblage."

She barely murmured, "Yes."

His heart was too full for trivialities. He turned his gaze upon her face.

"Barbara, what does it mean—this encounter here?—another name?—another surprise and puzzle?"

She was tremendously overwrought.

"Oh!—I don't really know."

"You don't know? But what am I to believe? You told me your name——"

"My name isn't Lady Constance—that is, I mean I've never said it was. I have told you nothing but the truth—at least, I've tried to tell you nothing else."

He felt her tremble, felt the strain of something she strove to meet with all her vanishing courage.

"Not Lady Constance?" he repeated. "This is just some masquerade?"

She was nearly ready for collapse, with increasing apprehension.

"I would tell you all about it if I could. I cannot tell you here. I wish—I wish—— Oh, if only I hadn't come! I know I deserve to be exposed! But I do wish you to believe me honest—believe me grateful—compelled to do—— If you could have a little more trust, in spite—— Oh! I don't know what you must think!"

"I've got to believe you're everything that's beautiful!" he answered, from his agony of heart. "It seems as if I've known you always, Barbara. I seem to have lived for years, the past two days. But don't you see—— This morning, why did you run away?—and where did you go? How did you happen to be in that house? Who was the man? And now, to-night—here—here like this! I hardly know what to believe. I want you to tell me everything. I've promised to be your friend!"

Her eyes met his with a wistfulness that crept to the shrine of his soul. Some violent conflict of emotions was waging in her breast. Fright and sheer bravery of spirit were written together in her face.

"I'd tell you if I could," she repeated. "I can't! But please, please don't condemn me. I couldn't bear it—now."

Some mighty exultation leaped to his outermost pulses.

"You'd care if I condemned you—little friend?"

Her eyes abruptly brimmed with tears.

"Please don't—call me that—unless——"

"I mean it—God help me, Barbara, no matter what—— I mean I want you to let me prove——

Why don't you let me help you more than I can with all this mystification? Perhaps you don't even realize——"

"Oh, please," she interrupted, "—not here—not now. Let's not talk about me any more."

Her beauty had overwhelmed him. Her appeal to his friendship, and her wish for his good opinion, had plunged him into a reckless love that might have accepted anything, if only her heart were his own. His soul had become her sponsor, his blind, tempestuous soul that reckoned not with logic, but with careless adoration that her lips could have bribed with a kiss. It was sheer, exalted madness, too sweet to be denied.

"But when?" he said. "We must have a talk—a long, frank conference. Certain things have happened that concern us both—and we need each other's help."

The music commenced, a waltz by Strauss that was honeyed with intoxicants, like wines translated into sound. Barbara smiled, a faint, shy hope in her eyes.

"May we dance?"

He took her in his arms. "Though paradise were lost instead of gained."

It was a wonderful dance, that enslaved him anew and blotted all else from the joyous world save just themselves alone. It was not less ecstatic or enamoring for the fact that ominous mysteries lay behind and all about their brief acquaintance. They should still have danced thus, heart to heart, though all the

world's volcanoes were threatening beneath their feet.

Only once did Barbara glance for a second in his eyes, but he felt his soul lift out and away to heights heretofore unimagined.

Both were breathless with things inexpressible when the waltz was concluded at last. Around with the throng they continued strolling while the world of realities returned.

"Are you going back to Mrs. Loomis's?" he asked her finally, roused to a sense that the evening must presently end, and mystery once more claim her for its own. "You won't run away from me again?"

"I—I'll do the best I can," she answered, evasively. "If only I can manage—— If we *are* real friends, don't make me promise anything to-night."

"But you will explain to me, Barbara, what some of these happenings mean? I assure you it's very serious indeed. You've got to let me see you, little friend. You must understand that now!"

She was once more trembling.

"Oh, I don't know what to do! I don't know what to do!"

"In Heaven's name, let me help you!" he implored. "Why keep me thus in the dark? Even this masquerade of yours to-night—you haven't told me what it means—or how it came about. You told me you had neither friends nor money, and yet, your gown—your jewels——"

He halted suddenly, afflicted with a sickening

thought that other gems besides the ruby had been stolen when the Indian prince was slain. It scarcely seemed possible she would dare to appear in public with any such gems—and yet, where might this boldness and tangle of mysteries lead, in the light of things she had already done?

They were startled eyes she turned upon him now.

"Oh, I thought we'd agreed to drop it all to-night. I can't! I can't tell anything—anything more—just yet!"

"But don't you see how it appears?" he still insisted. "To-day, in that house, I thought you needed help, and yet to-night——"

"Please take me to my seat," she interrupted, pleadingly, more alarmed than before. "I've promised this dance to that gentleman waiting now."

There was nothing for Vail to do but comply with her desire. He led her to the place where he had begged the formal introduction. She was there delivered to a foreign-looking man whom Julian had never met, and he watched her gliding away.

With the dance no more than well begun, and while he continued to watch her eagerly, he lost her in the throng. He made his way towards the grotto, saw her emerge alone and hasten away to the room where wraps were checked, and then, three minutes later, beheld her joined by a tall, broad-shouldered man in evening dress already prepared to depart.

Vail had barely time to observe that the man had brick-red hair and to realize it was he that he had seen on the stairs in the house of iron men when an-

other woman joined them and the trio hastened away. Then a voice behind him broke upon his ear.

"Oh, here you are, Julian, after all!"

He turned and found Enid Puryn on the arm of Chester Cranch.

The ball had become something more than a bore; it amounted to a torture.

CHAPTER XIII

JEROLD GARRISON'S CRAFT

THE ball that concluded at two o'clock in the morning lasted throughout the night for Vail, despite the fact that he and Enid retreated early from the scene.

This morning, as he sat once more at his desk in reach of the brass shell, hoarding some freshly purchased carnations and the ruby, he recalled every word and glance that had marked Miss Lee's behavior as Lady Constance Drew. His mind had known no repose or satisfaction since the moment he had seen her depart.

A complex sensation of relief and need for caution assailed him when Broughton opened the door to announce Detective Garrison. He piled a mass of unread letters before him and assumed an air of business occupation with the greatest alacrity, by way of preparation for the criminologist's inspection.

But he rose to give his visitor hearty welcome, when Garrison entered the room, and waved him at once to a chair.

"Well, well," he said, "I nearly short-circuited the wires here yesterday trying to get you on the 'phone. You must have been out all afternoon."

"All night as well," said Garrison, leaning somewhat heavily back in his chair. "I have frequently found that a false alarm will lead me further and cost more time than half a dozen genuine calls."

"To which case do you refer?" asked Julian, toying with a small bronze buffalo that usually held his papers on the desk. "Was it mine or the Maharajah's?"

Garrison eyed him, apparently with languid interest.

"That remains to be seen. Has it ever occurred to you to wonder if the two might have some slight connection?" Before Vail could answer he resumed. "That reminds me to ask who it was you were chasing yesterday in the car. You must have got out by the basement door and felt a bit pressed for time."

Julian attempted a laugh.

"I did. I heard someone open a door and I called rather lustily for you. Then I caught a glimpse of a man escaping and eagerly took up the chase. He got to his car before I could work the lock. Then I ran for your machine and tried to overhaul him—with what success you doubtless know."

"I know the effort failed. But about the man you saw and pursued—what sort of a person was he?"

"Why—I saw him so indistinctly—and briefly," Vail answered, warned to additional caution by Garrison's remark concerning possible connections of Barbara with the crime. "Didn't the chauffeur see what the fellow was like?"

Garrison shook his head.

"He must have been half-asleep on his seat when you leaped in the car with orders to chase the limousine. It's particularly unfortunate, Mr. Vail, you can give no description of the man."

Julian studied the small bronze buffalo minutely.

"I'm sorry. But about my birthday remembrance, have you anything new to report?"

Garrison leaned forward.

"Let me ask you a number of preliminary questions. Yesterday you said Miss Lee had left the place where you found her a shelter. Have you seen her since?"

"She had not returned last night," said Vail, evasively. "I haven't 'phoned this morning."

"Because you believe she isn't there?"

"I'm rather expecting her to let me know when she returns."

Garrison retained his attitude of alert and intensified interest.

"I ought to see her, Mr. Vail. I believe she told you something of her trunk, which some Mrs. Cree agreed to take in charge. Has anything been discovered of that?"

Vail felt a new apprehension—a vague sort of dread of the things that trunk might contain. Barbara's eagerness for its recovery coupled now with Garrison's hints bestirred his imagination to fill it full of pilfered gems as accusing as the ruby. He had gone too far in protecting the girl to betray his knowledge now.

"Nothing has been found of anything connected with the matter, to my knowledge," he replied. "I put everything up to you when you started from here yesterday. Perhaps it would help if I knew just what you have discovered."

"Perhaps," said Garrison, dryly. "First, with respect to Miss Lee and her father, the facts she imparted were substantially correct. Lee always lived apart from his neighbors, attempting to avoid acquaintances. He was an Englishman, I should say, with something to conceal."

Vail looked up sharply.

"An Englishman? You are sure?"

"Quite positive. We hope to discover more, but his record is obscure. It is more than likely his name was merely assumed."

Julian's thoughts confirmed this hypothesis, if they had not formed it for themselves. Nevertheless, it disturbed him anew to hear the suspicion put into words, in the light of what he knew.

"That is all you have found?" he inquired.

"All at present, concerning Lee. This box, in which your 'gift' was delivered, was made by Epsilon, the florist, on the order of a lady who instructed him over the 'phone."

Julian sat up stiffly, electrified by this intelligence.

"Then, of course, he knows her name!"

"The name she *gave* was Mrs. Howard Gribble."

Vail arose from his seat.

"Mrs. Howard Gribble—my friend Gribble's

wife? That's absurd! She sailed last week for Glasgow, and I saw her off at the pier!"

Garrison was calm.

"I said it was the name the lady *gave*. She doubtless chose it because your friend was sure to be away."

Vail sat down.

"It's an outrage!—to use a name like that! What arrangement was made about the box? I mean, what was it ordered for?—how was the matter presented to the florist?"

"Quite simply. He was desired to prepare a huge, cardboard flower-box, as you see it there, except for the wire supports, and to pack in it a small wild-cherry tree, in blossom, for your birthday gift, keeping everything secret, of course. That was last week. The case and tree were delivered to certain men, who said they came from Mrs. Gribble, Sunday night. The men arrived in a limousine car—perhaps the one you were chasing yesterday—and took the box away. The bill, by the way, made out to Mrs. Gribble, has not been paid."

"By George!" said Vail. "It was all concocted by someone familiar with the names of my friends, that's certain!"

"Precisely. And the persons concerned took the simplest, most efficient means of avoiding detection, in having Epsilon make and letter the box. It was easy enough to trace it to him, but there the trail is confused. When and where the young lady was substituted for the cherry tree remains to be discov-

ered, together with the motive in sending her to you."

Once more Vail arose. He began to pace the floor.

"This leaves us about where we previously stood. What motives are suggested to your mind, in addition to that which Gardner might possess?"

"Several," said Garrison, "but my deductions are incomplete. If by any chance Miss Lee had left some parcel in your care, the case might be plainer sailing. You have mentioned nothing of the kind."

Fortunately Julian's back was turned, as he paced the length of the office. Otherwise the sudden crimsoning of his face might not have been readily explained. He hesitated, yet only for a moment, stifling an impulse to reveal all he knew and so at least end the suspense.

"No," he said, "she left no parcel," a statement that was technically true. "Will you kindly inform me why you would have expected—from what you deduce—a supposition that she might have done anything of the sort?"

Garrison's eyes brightened.

"It would have been such a clever device—always supposing a coterie of cunning knaves had desired to conceal a bit of loot. What could be more crafty than to send some dangerous treasure to a gentleman, chivalrous and generous of heart, by way of a beautiful young woman?"

He was so fearfully near the truth that Vail felt a weakness at the knees. He echoed helplessly:

"A beautiful young woman?"

"She was so appraised by Miss Puryn—and women rarely bestow an undeserved compliment."

"I'm afraid that isn't the point, after all," said Julian, attempting a laugh, that lacked in mirth. "What sort of loot could possibly be delivered in a manner so extraordinary?"

"Oh, anything small, of great value—gems, for instance."

Vail was perspiring. How much did this over-penetrative criminologist know or suspect? The necessity for pursuing the subject was absolute. Julian halted in his march across the floor.

"Gems?—a poor friendless girl? What are you driving at, Garrison? What sort of a theory have you formed? Tell me what you have found."

Garrison met and held his client's eyes with a steady, searching gaze.

"I found *a branch of the cherry tree*—in the house of the ruby crime."

Vail received the shock without a sign. He even took time to think, and collect his nerve before he attempted an answer.

"A branch of the cherry tree that——"

"For which Miss Lee was substituted in the box."

Julian was apparently unruffled.

"And what do you make of that?"

Garrison shrugged his shoulders.

"It would make such a beautiful affair—such a triumph of deductive science—if only the girl had left something here for you to keep."

Vail forced a laugh.

"The great Gatama ruby?"

"Precisely."

The irony of the situation, with the ruby less than two feet away from the keen detective's nose, struck a spark from the sense of humor in Julian's composition that had recently lain inactive.

"Let me suggest you search the room," he said. "But I solemnly assure you there is nothing of Miss Lee's in the place." This again was strictly true, but doubt and dread had come for deep lodgment in his breast.

Garrison waved his hand in a deprecating gesture.

"Thank you, I shouldn't have waited so long as this had I not been afraid of some flaw in my chain of logic. Your statement is sufficient, and has been so from the first. You will see, however, the necessity of an interview between Miss Lee and myself."

Julian rushed to her defense.

"I am certain you would be the first to pronounce her an innocent, truthful young woman who has been abominably treated."

"That would be a very great pleasure, despite certain duties I owe to a thorough probing in the case of this Maharajah crime."

"But," said Vail, "now that you acknowledge the flaw in your line of reasoning, must you still insist upon connecting Miss Lee with an affair so revolting as that?"

"The facts insist upon connecting themselves," corrected Garrison. "What would you have me do?

Doesn't this cherry-tree development startle some assurance from your mind?"

"Oh, it mixes things up!" admitted Julian, once more pacing the room. "It's amazing, of course, and I wish to know precisely what it means. But naturally I'm more concerned to know why I was selected as the one to whom Miss Lee was sent. Why was it done—and by whom? Have you worked out a theory on that?"

Garrison nodded.

"It's a habit of my brain. Certain elements of her tale ring true. She seems, for example, to have been without either friends or relations—just the sort of person that anyone designing this plot upon yourself would select for an innocent tool. There is no one to follow her up, inquire about her disappearance, or sound an alarm in her behalf. In a word, there is no one to befriend or protect her, no matter what her fate."

Something welled in Julian's breast. He was all but betrayed into crying forth that she had one friend and champion who would serve her, if need be to the death. He calmed himself by an effort.

"I might have known you'd see that, Garrison," he said. "It struck me from the first."

"Yet, if she is friendless in Gotham, where has she been since sometime yesterday morning?"

Vail was a bit nonplused.

"Why—my presumption is she prefers some plans of her own—self-support—a brave sort of independ-

ence, rather than rely on the bounty of a stranger. But, whether she is an innocent victim or not, it is inconceivable she was sent to me for anything save a sinister motive. It must have been done for my hurt, or ruin, and on that I want your help."

"I am losing as little time as possible," Garrison assured him. "Have you found any further evidence that anyone is attempting to benefit at all by the business so far as it has gone?"

Julian related the affair of the ball, so far as it touched upon Iris Puryn and her sister, adding a brief recital of the attack that Gardner was making on the B. & K. C. R. R.

"I have an alternative theory in the matter," Garrison confessed, rising and taking up his hat. "It is still too uncertain and even fantastic to offer to anyone as yet. In a case like this we need each other's constant co-operation. I know you'll remember that. There is some connection between the ruby crime and Miss Lee, who was sent as a gift to you. I have overstayed my time this morning. If I find Miss Lee before you learn of her present place of retirement, I will let you know at once."

Julian stared at him blankly.

"You are attempting to search her out?"

"Naturally. She is very important to us both."

A clerk of the office knocked on the door and entered to deliver a telegram. Vail tore it open, and his heart fairly leaped with excitement.

It was dated from Hackett Tides, Long Island, and was worded as follows:

"If possible, please come, immediately, or send help, Island House. Ask for Mr. Pierce, cigar store. Barbara Lee."

With apparent indifference he folded it up and tossed it to the desk. He turned to Garrison again.

"Yes, if you find her, you might call me up on the 'phone."

"Right," said Garrison. "Good-by."

He went out at the private door.

"I've got to see her first," said Julian, to himself, and he hastened to the outer offices to deliver his day's instructions.

At twelve o'clock he steered his car on a ferry boat bound for Long Island, and commenced a forty-mile ride.

A small, high-power runabout, driven by a woman, rolled on like a shadow in his tracks.

CHAPTER XIV

A TREACHERY

THE region of Long Island's shore is traversed by roads in all directions, with signposts meagerly supplied. On two occasions Julian missed his way and paid with large losses of time.

It was dusk when at length he halted his car at Silver Rill, some three miles removed from Hackett Tides, and dark when at length he arrived on foot at the straggling, half-deserted village that marked his destination. He took this precaution to remain unobserved, in absolute ignorance of the fact that the woman behind him in the runabout had tagged him all the way.

The aspect of the isolated and neglected hamlet, with night thus descended upon it, was anything save inviting. A smell of tide-deserted mud was the only thing moving in the place. The few lights twinkling in the gloom that the moon would dissipate no earlier than nine o'clock, appeared to Vail like meager beams to warn the wary mariner away.

He was hungry, a fact now emphasized by the vanishment of any dream of dining with Barbara here that he might have entertained while driving alone on the road. He began to reflect that such a summons as the telegram might prove the cheapest

sort of blind, if not a device to get him away from his office while the place was being searched for the ruby.

Yet there was always the chance that Barbara was in fact in desperate need of his services, with, as Garrison had said, no one to befriend and protect her. So plausible was this contingency that nothing could have induced him to ignore the cry for help that he deemed the message to contain. His heart had leaped before him all the way, feverish but impotent to compass Barbara's safety against—the Lord alone knew what of fright or peril.

He was thoroughly convinced she was held in the power of some ingenious set of scoundrels with no one to turn to save himself. He was armed with a loaded revolver, reposing in the pocket of his coat, and had warned himself to expect either fraud or attack.

It was not without considerable trouble and annoyance that he came at length upon the little shack, dignified by the name of "store," where tobacco, deadly at fifty yards, was vended to the poison-proof denizens of the "Tides." It was part of a much-battered wheelhouse, from a steamboat long since defunct. It stood upon the edge of the mud that scented the air, where a rickety pier was succumbing to lingering consumption. Beyond was much of the ooze, and the edge of the water, where two or three boats were moored to sagging lines.

Vail disliked the outlook exceedingly, but his confidence returned at sight of Mr. Pierce, smoking

alone before his cigar emporium, in a contest of smells with the mud.

The cigar man was a tall, lazy, drawling individual, prone to many smiles, florid of countenance, and altogether cheering and assuring. He could be cautious, however, and even suspicious, which developed so soon as Julian broached his subject.

"I have had a wire from this town," Vail informed the smoker, "instructing me to ask for you as one who might help me to find the Island House, which I suppose is somewhere near. Can you spare the time at once?"

"Hold on, friend—go a bit easy," said Pierce, between puffs at his pipe. "How do I know ye be the man I'm waitin' fer over an hour? What's yer name?"

"Vail—Mr. Julian Vail."

"Keerect, so fur, and O.K.," agreed the man of caution. "Next, what's the name of the lady?"

"Miss Barbara Lee. It might be important, Mr. Pierce, to hasten in this matter—if you please."

"Keerect," consented Mr. Pierce, "but understand she asked me special to be keerful, as her troubles was numerous and the wrong guys might git the word."

"You saw her?" demanded Julian. "She was here? What is the trouble? Where is she now?"

"Hold on," admonished Pierce as before, slowly putting on his coat and closing the door of his place. "I'll take you where she is, for you wouldn't know if I told ye, and that's better than standin'

here gassin'!" He lighted a lantern and started for the pier. "What's more than that," he added, soberly, "we got to go crafty now. No noise, no fuss. Just do our business quiet or leave it alone altogether."

They came to the end of the creaking wharf, where the habitant pulled in a boat. It was large and provided with two sets of oars and a tiller, now shipped and lying on the seat at the stern.

Julian lost no time in clambering aboard and pulling off his coat. His companion, standing on the seat, raised the lantern to his face, put it down as if in indecision, then raised it again, and blew it out. He stored it underneath his seat.

"Better take it," he said, "but 'twouldn't be crafty to show a light or nuthin'. Leave me store your coat up for'ard. Might git wet there in the stern."

The coat was transferred, and, with both men presently plying the oars, the craft shot out from the zone of slime and was guided straight seaward from the shore.

Talking ceased. Afar off, Julian fancied, he could hear the muffled putt-putt of a motor boat, rapidly retreating in the gloom. The stars alone were visible, except for the rippled surface of the water in what appeared to be a bay of considerable extent. There was nothing anywhere in all the region that Vail had ever seen.

He could merely guess at the distance achieved, for rowing in darkness with nothing visible on either

hand to serve for guides or comparison is a weird experience in which it seems the boat makes no progress whatsoever. The labor seemed interminable. Vail had fancied fifteen minutes would be long for this excursion on the water. They rowed on and on, while a thousand doubts of Barbara's safety and the wisdom of his coming thus alone took possession of his thoughts.

Once he ventured to ask how much further they were going. The man of caution behind him replied with an eloquent gesture and continued to pull at the oars.

It was fully an hour before at last a vague, dark form was discerned ahead, where Julian was watching.

"Pull in your sweeps," whispered the boatman, "and don't make another peep."

The tide was still running outward, as Vail had already observed. It was nearly at the ebb, yet served to assist the oarsman as he swung out farther to starboard where the island loomed low and broad. Then at length the roof and bulk of a large-sized house, as dark as the one lone tree the place afforded, cut a dim silhouette against the sky, and supplied a bearing for Pierce.

He maneuvered his boat with considerable cunning to avoid a bank of mud and sand, then drove her prow straight inward for a deep but narrow channel, where it gently bumped in grass and weeds.

He arose and handed Vail his coat.

"Go 'round to the door by the tree," he whispered,

cautiously. "Tap three times, light, and, if nuthin' comes, jest throw some small gravel at the windy. I'll be waitin' fer ye here."

Julian was quickly in his coat and moving towards the house. Not a sound broke the stillness, save the chirrup of crickets in the shrubs. The island bore every sign of desertion. Neglect was apparent, in the meager light that the stars were casting on the scene.

Pausing once or twice to listen as he went, Vail arrived beneath the tree and found the door, beside a window, half-boarded up and dark. The entire place appeared about as inviting as a graveyard. It seemed absurd to expect to find Barbara or any other living being in a place so remote from the habitable world, or in a dwelling that showed not so much as a glimmer of light.

It was not without a feeling that treachery might lurk in any shadow that Julian halted and bethought him to step to the corner of the building and peer around before revealing his presence by so much as the taps on the door.

There was nothing in sight or hearing, either to excite more suspicions or allay a sense of alertness that the whole affair had engendered. Vail returned to the door and tapped there as directed.

Nothing happened. He stepped a little back, to meet any possible contingencies, and a certain excitement, born of the unknown element in the adventure, began to subside in his veins. He doubted the presence of anyone on the island, save himself

and Pierce. He wondered if the boatman might not have departed already, leaving him there alone.

Restraining an impulse to hasten back to the channel, he hesitated, caught up a handful of gravel, and threw it at the window above the door. The particles rattled sharply on the glass, but, as before, there was not the slightest result.

With a rapidly increasing disgust at the whole proceeding, and a growing conviction he had merely been duped and perhaps marooned here after all, he still had the patience to throw the sand again and stare at the window and door. He even tapped once more upon the boards—to no avail—then angrily turned away.

He had hardly gone a step when a slight sound caused him to turn. The door was gaping open. Two masked men rushed out abruptly, armed with a rope and a sack.

He wheeled to meet them as quickly as a panther. His hand flew back to his pocket for the pistol he had brought in case of need.

The gun was gone!

CHAPTER XV

AN INQUISITION

WITH a sudden realization that Pierce was a traitor, who had doubtless purloined the revolver while caring for his coat, Vail lurched upon the foremost man and struck him a blow that sent him reeling to the ground. Then he started to run for the boat.

Some mad intention of reaching the craft ahead of his pursuers and hurling himself upon the lazy Pierce before that honest-seeming individual could distinguish one man from another, was in his mind as he darted from the scene.

The man he had downed and the man with the sack were instantly plunging in his trail. In the briefest time he had come to the edge where the boat should be—to find there was nothing in sight.

He faced about, to attack as before—then was suddenly smothered from the rear.

A third man, doubtless Pierce himself, had been crouching there behind a shrub. He had thrown a sack and a mighty pair of arms about Vail's head and neck and hauled him clean backwards to the earth.

Even then the struggle was a fierce convulsion of

activity, with the masked men aiding their accomplice. Julian struck and thrashed with the punishing tactics of a badger. One of the men he caught on the shin with a vicious jab of his heel.

No one uttered a sound. A few hard percussions of breathing alone denoted the violence of the fight.

Despite the utmost the captive could do, the struggle was soon concluded. His captors were all of them muscular, if not so trained in athletics as himself. They dropped their bulk upon him, held him down, and, with both the sacks to stifle his breath and the rope to bind and tie him, were presently enabled to arise and nurse their many bruises, leaving him prostrate on the grass, to stare as he pleased at their masks.

"All right," one panted, tersely, in a rumbling, deep-toned voice. "We'll tend to the rest O.K."

Another bent down and made a thorough search of Julian's pockets, in quest of further weapons, of which there were none. The man who had used the sack from the rear now haltingly retreated through a growth of shrubs on the shore. As helpless as a log, Vail was roughly lifted by the pair who had issued from the house and was carried back the way he had come, to discover a lantern burning there, where someone had placed it for the men.

The foremost caught it up, still holding their captive's legs in the crook of his powerful arm, and entered the open door. A second barrier was swung from their path, by someone in the shadow. Vail was convinced he saw the sway of a woman's skirt

where the lantern threw its glow, but he was blinded to everything within that outer room by a light that streamed from a larger apartment beyond, to which he was carried, to be dropped at once on the floor.

The door was closed behind him and the men. The pair then proceeded deliberately to fetter his arms and hands less clumsily and released his legs from the coils.

"Now then, friend, git up and take a chair," said the shorter of the men, he of the rumbling voice. "And don't ever say we ain't treated you far more merciful than what you treated us."

He even assisted Vail to rise and motioned to a box. There was not a chair in the place. The furnishings were meager to the last degree, for a table, three stools, a lamp, and the box in question comprised the entire appointments. And one of the stools was lame.

Julian, still breathing hard, and angered all through his being, remained there on his feet.

"What is this?" he demanded. "What's the game?"

"What does it look like?" answered the spokesman, dryly, "puss in the corner?"

"You got me here for something, doubtless," Julian answered. "We might as well get at it at once."

"Spoken like a gent and a scholar," was the comment of the man behind the mask. "Let's all be honest and brief and the caucus will soon be over.

That's my policy—brief and honest. What we want, my friend, is the ruby you swiped from the girl."

Julian felt a hot flame of fire burn up in the furnace of his heart, together with astonishment, resentment, and hopelessness in the situation.

"You're a liar, both as to your policy and your accusation," he replied, no less ready to agree to certain truths than before, and much more calm, in the face of his reception by the men. "I have 'swiped' no ruby from anyone, and beg you to make yourself plainer." He took a keen, brief inventory of the spokesman, observing he had lost his left-hand thumb.

"I'm plain enough—face, morals, and proposition," said the philosophical scoundrel, admirably cool, and he sat himself down, took out a pipe and began to stuff it with tobacco. "It's a cinch you got the sparkler—and we reckon you're goin' to produce. Now what's the use of wasting your time—which is worth far more than our'n?"

Vail did some rapid thinking. He had no intention of declaring the find in Barbara's shoe, for the reason he hoped to secure some useful information from this pair of men—both of whom, he realized, were concerned in the murder of the Maharajah—and also because he had no intention of admitting, even to them, the girl's connection with the crime. Furthermore, the stone was plainly neither theirs, hers, nor his own. He felt himself the ruby's custodian, in spite of his wishes in the matter. He was more or less responsible for its safety now, and his

notions perceptibly stiffened in the light of this present attack.

"It isn't a case of wasting time, unless you choose to waste it," he informed the spokesman, as before. "I suggest again that you explain your meaning clearly. To what ruby do you refer?"

"If callin' liars was polite, I'd prob'ly git on the job," said the spokesman, lighting a generous match and puffing much reek from his pipe. "I'll be just as plain as you like. You won't take the trouble to deny, I prays, that you recent received a girl, the same bein' sent you in a box—which all your friends is tellin' pretty plenty?"

"Well?"

"Well now, honor amongst thieves, as the sayin' has it, hey? You swiped the ruby out of her shoe heel, when said shoes was left there in your office. You done a neat, slick job, screwin' the heel back on, 'cause you didn't have no glue and did have the tools in your desk." He paused and puffed at his pipe, then reached across and tapped his captive on the knee. "That's clear and to the point, I reckon. Now I echoes we want the stone. No Sunday-school lectures. We—want—the—stone."

Julian shrugged his shoulders.

"Your statement is quite distinct. But do you suppose, if I found a ruby as you declare, I would keep it in my possession?"

"What's the answer?—you done that very thing. 'Cause why?—you're stuck on the girl, and want to keep her out of the law." The scoundrel saw the

color rise to Julian's face. "Now don't git none embarrassed, or tell us you ain't, fer she's sure some pretty, and you proved your feelin's comin' here. Agin, you ain't blabbed to the tecks. Now then, as friend to friend, ain't I on? So git busy and tell us where it is."

Vail was silent for a moment.

"You got me here for this?"

"Good guess."

Julian smiled.

"You ought to know I haven't the stone you require. You searched my office for yourself."

"And got the shoes," supplied the rascal, coolly. "I'd rather not risk that often—especial when the shoes has been touched. Which is why we got you here to save a raft of trouble. Excuse me fer bein' blunt and plain, Mr. Vail, but you're goin' to open up about the ruby or git some 'steenth degree, without no extry session of Congress."

The light in Vail's eyes was a glitter; his face was like chiseled stone.

"I'm helpless in your hands, I am perfectly aware," he answered, with slow deliberation. "Naturally you don't dare make this a matter of man to man. But, if you expect to frighten or threaten me into any part of your murderous or thieving games, you have made a mistake in your man."

The pipe was lighted anew.

"Just what I was afeerd of, a stubborn, die-hard cuss. I'm kind of sorry, too. You ain't the sneakin' sort. You'd 'a' made a crook worth braggin' on—if

you hadn't turned out wrong." He arose and gestured to his friend. "Well, Meat-ax, the sooner we dilute his nerve the better, fer I ain't the heart to keep him in suspense."

"Meat-ax," who might with propriety have been christened "Headsman," for his sinister appearance, in the blackness of his mask, arose without delay, prepared for deeds of any questionable hue.

Still the spokesman only spoke.

"Will you walk, Mr. Vail, or git peevish and make us do the pall-bearers' stunt again?"

Julian looked at him fearlessly.

"What do you mean to do?"

"The 'steenth degree, as mentioned previous." He gave a quick signal to his companion and the two, abruptly grasping Vail by the shoulders and fettered arms, marched him through a narrow hall to a door that opened out to the grounds.

The moon was up, but its light was obscured by clouds. The lighted lantern rested on the ground, provided as before by someone entirely unseen. But, whereas it had formerly illuminated the way inside the house, it now revealed the abysmal door of a cellar-like place in the earth.

A ladder protruded from the hole, while an iron box and heavy weights were scattered nearby on the grass. A few feet removed from the hole and ladder was a sort of wooden chimney, fully four feet high, like the vent of a vault beneath.

The group was halted by the well. Had the slightest opportunity for resistance or escape been

afforded, Vail would have battled like a fiend. His helplessness was perfectly convincing. Despite his exceptional courage, he felt a sinking in his breast.

"What do you mean to do?" he demanded, as before.

"Now don't shift the blame to us," beseeched the spokesman, in an injured tone of voice. "You're doin' this to yourself. Once more, my friend, will you put us right on the ruby?"

Julian boiled as before.

"I've told you all I have to tell, and that you may take as final!"

"Then climb down the ladder quiet, rememberin' all of us is gents."

Julian did not obey at once, and both of the men, unceremoniously hustling him forward, bodily placed him, feet foremost, down the hole and lodged him on the rungs. Then, quite as roughly, they crowded him down the slanted ladder and presently shook him off.

He fell perhaps three feet, landing on a slimy floor of planks, in a cistern as dank and dark as a tomb. The ladder was instantly thrust further forward, till its top was caught by hooks at the edge of the hole, when a heavy plank door was flung upon and barred across the orifice, with the weights all piled on its top.

What futile calls and demands for liberation Julian made on the impulse of the moment were drowned by the sounds from above. Except for a small, barred square of starlight, seen through the

chimney-like vent, the place had no suggestion of a break in the absolute gloom.

The lantern was presently carried to this vent, and its rays came down in a small and useless square. By its feeble illumination Vail confirmed a fear that the vent was barred at its base. Something like a water mark was shown, up near its top.

The spokesman cheerily peered down.

"I hope you like the bathroom, Mr. Vail. You're goin' to stay there till you loosen up on the gem. We're about to leave the water in and let you feel it rise. 'Tain't real speedy—'cept at the start. It comes up with the tide. When you want to come out with the ruby and all, you kin let us know by wireless."

Vail saw the lantern disappear, and horrible darkness descended to fill the place. He heard a distant sound, then the trickle and gush of water that somewhere entered the place. He presently knelt and so put his hand on the floor.

His trousers were suddenly penetrated at the knees. His hand met a thin but moving sheet of liquid, on the planks, and a chill crept swiftly to his heart.

CHAPTER XVI

A METHOD OF TORTURE

FOR a moment Vail merely stood stock-still, after rising to his feet. The sound of the in-rushing water considerably increased.

Moving quickly, groping over to the right, Julian promptly met a wall. It was made of planks, and barnacles clung to its damp and moldy surface. He made violent efforts to wrench his hands free from the ropes, and again explored forward, wading in water already well up on his shoes.

His courage had not weakened, but his whole strong being was incensed and outraged to the limit of endurance. Again and again he swelled his muscles, jerked at the ropes, and dragged to escape from the coils.

One of his hands was working loose, even as he shouldered along the wall, to a corner of the cistern. In a paroxysm of activity he presently cast off the rope sufficiently to liberate one hand and his arm. He had come to another corner of the cellar. The water was lapping at his ankles.

In the briefest time he discovered the place to be the ordinary type of plank-boarded cistern, perhaps ten feet square, and less than eight in height. He discovered the inlet for the water, and was somewhat

appalled at the size and velocity of the stream that entered from without.

He had uttered no sound since that first impulsive protest. There was nothing of the weakling in his composition, yet the facts took a grip on his life.

He groped his way back to the ladder, with the water swiftly rising to his ankles. There he freed himself completely of his fetters and mounted on the ladder to the ceiling of the tomb. The door, he promptly discovered, was a closely fitted mechanism, wedged in to prevent much leak.

If for a moment he entertained a hope that the water might rise no higher than, say, to within a foot of the roof, the wretched bit of comfort vanished as soon as it came.

His exploring hand found colonies of barnacles, adhering to the ceiling where nothing save the brine of the sea could either have planted or nourished the creatures. He knew the water-mark, noted in the chimney-like vent, measured the rise of the tide.

There was sweat on his forehead, despite the chill of the dungeon, now flooding from the bay. He listened intently for the men above, while a new thought flashed in his brain. There was nothing to hear save the plash of the entering stream.

He stepped to a higher rung of the ladder that leaned from the trap and, adjusting his shoulders beneath the wedged-in cover, strained upward with concentrated might.

He halted this attempt abruptly, however, for the rung where he stood was treacherously splintered

with the crushing weight his effort had put upon the rotted nails and timber. The door had not been budged.

One horror after another crept upon his mind, as a clearer comprehension of his plight thrust ugly arguments between his sense of pride or duty and his instinct of self-preservation.

He descended again to the floor, to measure the water—to measure it on his legs. It had risen halfway to his knees. Once more he went up on the ladder, to sit there in the absolute, impenetrable dark, grimly wondering how long he might be obliged to wait, as helplessly doomed as a rat in a trap, for the tide to engulf him completely.

He was still far more angered than alarmed. Fear had small place in his system, and something in him, defiant and indomitable, combatted this method of torture with the stubbornest determination, vaguely persuading him that something could and must occur to give him victory at last.

He cursed himself, however, for an easy dupe who had been a mere fool from the first. With all the evidence accumulated against her, by her own admissions and actions, he had still believed in the innocence of Barbara Lee with a blindness that nothing could excuse. He banished every recollection of her eyes, her words, the artful bits of coquetry, and the wistfulness with which he was sure he had been tricked.

The frank admissions made by the man who had questioned him here in the house were not to be rea-

soned away. The girl had been sent to his office with deliberate intent to land the gem in his keeping to baffle the law. She had shown her concern for and worry over the shoes, without delay. Nothing save the accident that spilled the water from the vase had been left from the careful plans of those who devised the scheme. And to all of the plan he felt she had consented.

His stubbornness now, in refusing to deliver up the stone, was less and less a measure for Barbara's protection and more and more an outraged intention of defeating the purposes of all the gang and placing the sinister ruby in the hands of the Chief of Police.

While he sat there, for the time impervious to any thought save that of his birthday gift and the mysteries since developed, he was finally made aware of a cold sensation of chill attacking his foot.

With a sudden accession of awe he realized that the water in the place had risen with insidious speed. It was lapping at his feet!

In a cold perspiration, he retreated upward another rung, for the first time obsessed by thoughts that the men who had slain the Maharajah were capable of any manner of crime and would show not the slightest sign of mercy if his silence were still maintained.

Nevertheless, so galling and shaming appeared defeat, so weak and invertebrate seemed surrender, even in the face of death, that he could not consent to cry enough and plead to be released. Nevertheless, it

was a ghastly thing to contemplate—this steady, unrelenting lap and rise of the water, invisibly encroaching on his life.

Slowly, on the surface at the center of the pool, appeared some ghostly thing. Intangible, uncertain, suggesting luminosity, and then quite disappearing, it played there weirdly, assuming shapes that seemed to break and dissipate, only to reassemble from the molten ebony and silently mock with forms again.

Vail beheld it, stared where it went, and felt that his brain was giving way and conjuring wraiths from fear. Then at last, as it rose, more lambent than before, he knew it for some filmy, vague reflection that stole down the vent from the sky. Here and there through the unseen mass of water, steadily climbing, came brilliant, fading flashes, like stars in miniature, where tiny phosphorescent creatures disported, wooing their microscopic kind.

God only knew what creatures besides were gliding here and there in the place. Vail now put his hand downward, and a prompter contact with the water than he had expected caused him to snatch it back again as if from liquid fire.

What purpose was he serving to die here like a beast? He asked himself this question savagely, angrily, confessing he had no courage for an end so horrible and purposeless.

Perhaps, he reflected, as one alternative, he might deceive these brutes who had put him to the torture. They deserved any punishment he could possibly in-

flict. It mattered little what he told them, if only they would lift the door and let him out, to fight his way to freedom. He felt he could slay them with his naked hands, for the last few minutes endured in this place where death crept up by inches.

It was not, however, till the water, uncanny and gruesome in its rising, soaked once again through his shoe to his skin that Julian raised his voice.

"Hullo!" he shouted. "You thieves! Hullo there! Lift up the door!"

The men above had grown impatient, marveling at the spirit of the man in the well. They had remained near at hand, silently smoking at their pipes. The spokesman now came to the vent, down which his utterance rumbled.

"Was you callin' fer soap or towels?"

"Open up!" shouted Vail. "You can have your cursed stone!"

"What place at your office is it in?"

Even now, with the fellow's voice thus mockingly in his ears, Vail resented the sacrifice he felt constrained to make. He tried an experiment.

"Did you find that box of cigars in the left-hand drawer of my desk?"

"Nuthin' doin'," said the rumbling voice. "I didn't think you'd try to work us so shameful. I dumped them weak-kneed smokes, alias cigars, all out of the box myself. Come on now, don't fergit your record as a gent."

"I haven't said it is in that box. Will you open up the trap?"

"You open yours first. Now where's the ruby at?"

Julian felt he would give the ransom of a king to get his two free hands upon this rascal's throat. The water was lapping at his ankles as he sat high up on his perch.

"The stone is down in the bottom of that big brass cartridge-shell I use as a vase on my desk."

"By God!" said the voice, "and me with the thing in my fist! I must be loosin' my nip, not to think of a thing like that!"

Some reply vouchsafed by his companion made a murmur only to Vail.

"Come on now, keep your word!" he called. "I expect you to be a man."

A sound of someone walking across the roof of the cistern followed.

"Don't fidgit, and don't be uneasy," said the spokesman, at the vent. "We're shuttin' off the pickle. You'll hear it quit runnin' right away."

Julian's impatience increased.

"You keep your promise! Never mind the water! Open the door!"

The man above lit a match to apply to his pipe.

"We'll open the door and let you out—when we git the word the ruby's where you say. Ain't you comfortable, sittin' high and dry on the ladder? Can't kick, can you?—nuthin' worth recordin' on the minutes of the meetin'?"

A new, swift chill went coursing through Julian's veins.

"Let me out!" he demanded, angrily. "Keep your bargain and let me out!"

"Huh!" exclaimed the astonished criminal. "You couldn't keep cool in an ice-house, not to say nuthin' of hell. Now take my advice and don't keep up your fever. Jest make up the berth and git a little sleep. We'll call you in the mornin'."

Julian shouted to him desperately, as he heard him moving away. There was no response from the vent. A dread, unearthly silence had settled in the place, where the sound of entering water gradually diminished, then altogether ceased.

In the utter futility of raging, or heaving with his shoulders at the trap, Vail felt a sickening sensation of desertion pervade him through and through.

The thing he might have expected, yet against which he had from the first been powerless, had actually come to pass. He was prisoned here in the more than half-filled cistern, to escape—the Lord knew how! To wait here, cramped on the ladder, while these thieves and cutthroats returned to the shore, made their way to the city, and verified his confession might be but a sentence of death.

He could scarcely credit his senses, scarcely believe that two human beings could be so lost to compassion as to leave him in such a plight. He felt convinced they must presently relent and give him a chance for his life. They had shown some slight inclinations towards decency and mercy in shutting out the tide. They must come back, if only to lift

off some of the weights and make it possible for his own endeavors to heave away the door!

He held his breath expectantly, harking for sounds from above. There were none that his ear could distinguish, beyond a ringing in the well. Now and again some drip of water fell from the roof, its metallic note ringing clearly, like a tinkle in a cave.

At last a strange, pulsating whisper impinged upon the air, coming, so far as Vail could judge, from the water's entering tube.

He recognized it abruptly with another sinking of his heart. It was the muffled exhaust of a motor boat, retreating out on the bay.

The faint percussions grew more faint—and he knew the men were embarked for the distant shore.

His ray of hope was suddenly extinguished. He only recovered from the shock when he found his foot intensely cold. He had held it in the water while engrossed with other affairs. He drew it up a matter of several inches, while a clammy feeling, such as one might experience upon being buried alive, ate its way to the marrow of his bones.

How long he sat there, straining his ears in the silence, the man could never have told. He was roused at last by the coldness of both of his feet.

They were both once more in the water.

Then a horrible truth flashed hideously upon him. *The water was leaking in! It had not been shut off completely—and the men had gone away!*

CHAPTER XVII

A CREEPING DEATH

THE inescapable realization that, instead of entering rapidly to end his doom in reason, the tide was trickling to the well, to edge like disease to his heart, was absolutely insupportable to the man already fiendishly tortured.

Vail saw himself, in his imagination, driven up and up on the ladder, all but his head at last submerged, and his air-demanding lips and nose pressed up to the final hollow in the ceiling, to be finally covered by the tide.

He tried to believe he had deceived himself, that the water had not increased its depth, but that his feet had slipped carelessly down. In the absolute darkness of the hole he could make no measurements. He felt down the side of the ladder till the tip of his longest finger barely touched the surface of the brine.

He held it there like a fixture, waiting, while he barely took his breath. In the course of perhaps ten minutes the water rose to cover his finger-nail.

He did not remove his hand. He clung to some mad, impossible hope with breathless desperation. Another ten minutes brought the touch of death to the joint above the nails.

He suppressed a groan and tried another system, placing his hand an inch above the water, and gripping the ladder as before. In a time that in some ways seemed an age and in others a tick of the clock of doom, the cold, wet caress was floated to his flesh.

After that it was one long nightmare of cold perspiring. The water came so high at last he could no longer raise his feet above it. Wavelets and ripples then lapped unhurriedly up to the rung whereon he sat.

Like a stone man, chilled and immobile, he finally crouched on the ladder's top with the water rising to his chest. The ghosts of light and phosphorescent gleams played soullessly in the ebon mass that gradually rose towards his lips.

It seemed as if great ages of time had stretched their hours beyond all earthly custom and blotted all sound from the world. Then something again besieged his brain, like the far-off voice of a star.

He felt it was not a sound he heard, but his own inner wish for a sound. Anything to break this frightful silence would be welcome, even the crack of doom.

He bent every faculty, to catch the faintest filtering of sound the outside world might surrender. Something, he felt almost certain, disturbed the air, with the feeblest of wave pulsations.

He shouted with all his might.

"Hullo! Hullo! Hullo!"

The condensed reverberations in the filling place

rolled painfully back upon his ears. He listened as before. There was no reply. The water had crept so high by now that the merest foot of air remained above it in the hole.

He felt he was mocked by heaven and the night, in his wild, fierce hope for a sound. Then it came again, in a vague, strange way, conveying no meaning to his mind.

Again as before he shouted, and his voice sped out at the vent.

"Julian! Julian!" came a cry—then someone ran over the roof.

His heart nearly burst with sudden relief and its conflict of emotions. The cry was in Barbara's voice.

"Barbara! Here!" he called, excitedly. "In the cistern! Pry open the door!"

She had gone quite past, but returned at once and ran to the wooden vent.

"Down there?" she cried, in a shrill and quivering treble. "Julian, are you there?"

"For God's sake, hasten!" he replied. "The water is up to my throat! The door—the door—with the weights on top! I can help if you'll knock out the bar!"

She waited for nothing more. Exhausted by her midnight tussle with a boat far too heavy for her strength, disheartened, frightened, even terrified by every moment passed in rowing to the place, she nevertheless attacked the weights on the trap like a fierce little engine of might.

They were bulky hunks of iron—pieces of anchors, an old ship's screw, and rail from some distant tracks. With strength superhuman, in this moment of need, she tugged at the inert masses till her very spirit might have been strained with the energy she spent.

One and another of the inert things she dragged or toppled from the door. She flung out the bar like a little elemental savage.

"They're nearly all off!" she cried, at last, and then Vail heaved it from below.

"Look out!" he shouted, as he felt it give. "I'll have no trouble now!"

She stepped away, panting and suddenly weak, with her labor at last accomplished. She tripped on one of the weights dislodged, and went down on the earth with a sob of relief, as Julian, dripping and white as death, rose out of the hole in the moonlight like one who has broken from his grave.

He reeled from weakness, cramp, and chill, but would not submit to fall. Barbara leaped to her feet again, and caught at his arm to support him.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh! I thought I'd never find the place!"

He staggered over against the house and leaned there heavily. Despite his numbness and the half-chilled blood in his veins, he felt some sweet delirium of joy expanding in his breast. He took no time to accuse or acquit the girl who stood before him. She had come—that was enough.

"Good Heavens, Barbara," he finally said, in a

voice made weak by reactions, "how did this ever happen? How did you come? How did you know I was here?"

She felt she could sink on the ground at last, now that the strain was over. She, too, was white and trembling.

"I have been for hours locked up in a room over there on the shore! I heard them planning, telling it all, from the closet in the place. I broke out some of the plaster—and it made the partition thin. I knew there was something going on. Oh, I didn't know what to do!"

Julian was pulling himself together.

"You rowed here alone, in a boat?"

"Oh, yes! I suppose I stole it! But what could I do? They told about this awful cellar, but I didn't understand. They told how to find this island—and I've rowed—and my hands—— I thought I should have to give up!"

Even in the moonlight the blisters on her two little palms were plain enough to see. Vail could have crushed them with his lips. But the needs of the hour were great and escape was imperative for both.

"Nothing on earth could have saved my life but you," he told her, fervently. "Where did you land your boat?"

"Right over there—somewhere," she said, already confused by directions. "I don't think I tied it very well."

"Then show me where," said Julian. "The tide might float it off."

They started at once for the bit of beach where Barbara had landed. They missed the place, but continued on, passing two or three similar beaches. When they came to the harborage Barbara had chosen, the boat was not to be seen. The rising tide had already filched it from the sands.

She was not at all certain of the place. Not until they had traversed all that eastern shore of the island was the truth made inescapable.

"I've lost it—I know I've lost it!" moaned Barbara, in despair. "I didn't dare to wait to tie it better!"

Julian took her by the arm.

"Never mind; perhaps we can find another. They may have left the one that brought me out." He led her back towards the house.

"You ought to do something to dry your clothes," she told him, anxiously. "Perhaps we can build a fire."

"I shall soon be all right—the wind is warm," he answered, still marveling at what she had done. "Some good stiff exercise is all I need, and I'll get it—if we find any sort of a boat. If you wouldn't mind resting at the house——"

"Oh, I couldn't rest—I mean not all alone! Couldn't I help to look around, with you?" she pleaded. "I'm afraid I'm a little bit nervous."

A little bit nervous! He thought her wonderful, the bravest, stanchest little comrade he had ever known in the world! She had ample cause to fear or dread the dark and silent house, after what she had

undergone. He knew that, like himself, she must have experienced some ordeal to rack her inmost nerve.

It was no time for arguments or questions. He wanted her just as she was—at his side, trusting her safety to his strength. He felt he should want her always thus, so vast was the love that had once more surged upon him.

That a hundred things remained to be explained was a fact he avoided by choice. It must all be postponed for the moment, in their vastly greater need to effect an escape to the shore.

"If you wish it," he said, "we will search the island together. If we do not come upon a boat—but we must—we simply must!"

He led her past the front of the house, where windows that were dark and broken stared blankly down in the moonlight like the structure's forbidding eyes. They came at length to the channel where Pierce had approached with the tide. There was nothing there, as Julian had feared. The spot, however, aroused his resentment and a query to his mind.

"Of course you couldn't have wired me, Barbara," he said. "The message I got was a forgery, sent in your name."

"Why, I couldn't send anything—I'd have been so glad of a chance," she answered at once. "You came here on a telegram supposed to be sent by me?"

"I landed just here," he answered. "I'm rather in hopes their boat is somewhere near."

"Who were the men?" she asked him. "Did you see—would you know them again?"

"They were masked, disguised. There! Is that a boat or a log?"

They hastened along the moonlit beach, parting the sumach for the purpose, only to find that a half-buried log had aroused a false hope by its form. Vail was convinced they would find no boat about the place.

He held a little more firmly to Barbara's arm as they came to rougher walking and, save for the disappointments met at the tiny bays, could have blessed the night that had brought her here, despite the haunting, persistent facts that lay beneath it all.

The island was insignificant, perhaps three acres in extent. Besides the empty, dilapidated house, there were several smaller buildings, all at the farther end. When the shore had finally been circumscribed, to no avail, the one remaining hope of a boat was in some of these sheds and shacks.

With a steadily increasing anxiety, concentrating rapidly on Barbara and the need for taking her back to proper surroundings, Vail led the search to one and another of the wretched sheds, to find them invariably empty.

The last frail hope was gone. They stood there alone in the moonlight, and the truth came home to them both.

They were helplessly marooned on the island, with no possible means of escape.

CHAPTER XVIII

LIKE A PRIMITIVE PAIR

VAIL had been no quicker than Barbara to realize the facts confronting them here. He was far more grim than she, for he was far less weary.

Despite his fearful ordeal in the cistern, he was rapidly regaining his normal warmth and strength. Barbara, on the other hand, was thoroughly exhausted, not only by her long, excited vigil in the room where she had been imprisoned, but infinitely more by her struggle with the boat to bring it at last to her goal.

She had never felt so great a need for a strong, protecting arm on which to sink. She could barely remain on her feet. Yet she looked in his face and attempted a brave little smile.

"And now what shall we do?"

Julian felt the noblest impulses of his nature stir as he gazed in her trusting eyes.

"We'll go to the house. Perhaps I can make you comfortable, while I'm drying out, here in the breeze."

"Oh, but—couldn't we build a little fire," she said, "and sit there beside it a while? The house may be damp—and unpleasant."

"You're not afraid of an empty house—not after what you've done? It's your castle, you know, tonight."

She understood him perfectly, and loved him anew for the delicate thoughtfulness by which she felt she was surrounded. Yet she did not overcome her dread of the inhospitable "castle."

"Will you make a little fire to warm us first?—just the littlest bit of a fire."

"If I can find a match that's dry." He led her through the shrubbery, silvered by the moon, towards the one lone tree of the island, standing at the rear of the house.

They passed the buried cistern, where Julian halted, perforce. Already the water had risen above the rim of the door and was flooding the hollow in the soil. A shudder passed through his frame as he conjured up a picture of himself, with a death grip on the ladder, stark and cold beneath the weighted trap, but for Barbara, now at his side.

"They had a lamp and a lantern," he informed her, proceeding on as before. "There may be some matches I can find."

Barbara waited beside the door while he groped his way into the house. She had never felt so tired in her life—and never more happy. She could not feel the slightest fear, nor banish from her eager heart the wild, sweet joyance that the night and Julian excited. She would gladly have sunk on the fragrant grass in sleep, so long as she knew he was near.

She presently saw the gleam of a match where Julian lighted the lamp. Then he presently returned.

"I think you'd be far more comfortable," he said, "if you'll take possession of the house."

She smiled as before.

"If it will please you—after just a few minutes of the fire."

What madness and tenderness and holy joy were leaping in his veins! She helped him to gather weeds and twigs, then bits of board and water-rounded blocks for a blaze beneath the tree.

"You ought to sleep in the warmth of this," she told him, when at length the blaze was sparkling and leaping from the fuel. "You can't dry in any other way."

"All right," he agreed. "Sit down with your back to the tree, for just a few minutes before you retire to 'Castle Silence.'"

She smilingly obeyed, a delicious sense of peace, security, and warmth pervading all her being. Never had night seemed half so beautiful, or the cricket's song so soothing to her heart.

She was dreaming still, of fairy comforts and of knights of old, when she slipped into visionless slumber. She was resting like a tired child, asleep against the tree.

Julian silently nodded. He had seen the drooping of her eyes. How helpless and girlish she was, with the glow of the flames upon her face! Such a tenderness and exaltation of love as he had never

dreamed existed burned as divinely in his breast as the flame of an altar lamp.

Despite the exquisite rapture of gazing on her helpless loveliness, he presently rose from his place by the fire and went to the house, where he had previously discovered a tumble-down couch. This he prepared as best he might to receive her for the night.

He also set the lamp to give her guidance, and, coming again to the slumbering girl, gently shook her and called on her name.

"Come, come, little friend, you're cheating," he said, when at length her eyes were opened. And longing to take her like a child in his arms, to carry her into the house, he merely assisted her up to her feet, and steadied her over to the door.

She was drowsily weak, and could barely walk, but sighed with a sweet content, pausing in the entrance to lean for a moment against the lintel and meet his ardent gaze.

"King Arthur, may I leave the door open?" she requested. "Then I wouldn't be the littlest bit afraid."

"The castle is yours," he answered. "I turn here and wish you good-night."

"Good-night," she said, sleepily. "Don't forget to keep up your fire."

He watched her walk unsteadily in and disappear beyond. The lamp she permitted to burn.

Back to his fire he turned like one in a dream.

The island, that an hour before had been a horrible Inferno, was an Eden to him now. He gazed at the flames like a happy boy, then set about to gather wood like the veriest primitive man.

At length he sat down with his back to the tree where Barbara had napped. He fell asleep as she had done, from exhaustion and content. From time to time, the long hours through, he awoke to wonder where he was. And, beholding the glow of Barbara's lamp—a luminous sign of his holy grail—he returned to his slumbers with a smile.

Nevertheless, he was stiff and cold when the dawn light aroused him at last. He shivered like a Rip Van Winkle, vitalized in ancient limbs by the touch of a new-made morning.

He arose unsteadily, rubbing at his eyes as if to dissipate a world of unreality. But the scene was real enough, and the whole experience rushed back upon him swiftly.

The ashes of his fire were gray and cold. His clothing was far from dry. He shook himself, to conjure back his warmth and to rouse his faculties. Barbara's lamp, he then observed, still cast a glow on the inner walls of the house. He knew she continued asleep.

All the unsolved problems of the previous evening revived to confront him anew. What should he do to appease their hunger, and to gain the distant shore? When Barbara had last partaken of food

he had not inquired in the night; he himself was nearly famished.

That the house contained no provisions he was certain. The prospect of fasting till they reached the shore was not to be escaped.

He examined his watch. It had stopped. Not only had water doubtless entered the movement, but he had failed to wind it in the night. He guessed the hour at something like five in the morning—and a maddening desire for a pot of coffee, piping hot, accentuated his hunger.

In the hope that during the search at midnight he and Barbara might have overlooked important nooks or beaches, he started briskly on another quest for a boat. He skirted the rim of the island rapidly, taking no time to rejoice in the beauties of the land, sky, and water, which at a time more leisurely must have charmed his every sense. Though he made an especial search for mussels, clams, or oysters, not one did the island's beach afford.

Far off in one direction he could see another dot of greenery doubtless similar to this. A low, flat shore was visible for many miles, but apparently without a village in all the panorama. And not a sail nor a funnel did he find on all the wide horizon. The place was incredibly isolated, a fact that doubtless accounted for its desertion, after much expenditure to make it a summer home.

More important than all this business, however, was the total absence of a boat to aid their escape. Once again, as in the night, he made a search of

the outbuildings, open to the weather. Beyond a few old planks, which even to his desperate ingenuity suggested only material for a fire, they yielded nothing new.

The matter began to assume a serious aspect that brought an added alarm. He and Barbara might possibly be stranded here till they died. Suspicions that the scoundrels who had put him in the cistern would never return to assist him out were more than suggested to his mind. If no one came there in pursuit of Barbara, the island might be unvisited for many weeks at a time. And he himself had left no word whereby he might be traced.

Sooner than perish, he told himself, he would tear down all the flimsy sheds and spike the boards together for a raft. In one building a rude sort of loft had been constructed, where junk had apparently been thrown. The place had manifestly been the boathouse once, since broken oars, old bits of canvas, rotting rope, and paint cans with brushes hardened in the solid stuff they still contained, were piled in the loft and strewn upon the floor.

More thoroughly to investigate this dunnage, Vail brought in a box and clambered to the overloaded platform. It promptly gave way beneath his weight. With a sounding crash the entire loft was rent and crumpled from its place. It spilled out everything it held—its dust, old cordage, cans, and broken spars, and a flattened canvas parcel, tied with rope.

Julian leaped for a beam that crossed above the

planks, clinging there above the confusion and clouds of dust till he could drop straight down in safety. This he presently accomplished; then, in curiosity, dragged out to the light the tied-up parcel of canvas.

It was a folding canvas boat. This and the fact that it was old, badly worn, and minus stays and braces he had barely discovered when Barbara came running to the place. She had heard the crash when his weight brought down the loft.

He paused to greet her happily, the vision of her early morning beauty incredibly reinspiring to all his hopes in the final triumph of love. No sea nymph, wood sprite, or island queen could have seemed more dainty or appropriate, or so gifted with helpful courage.

"What have you found?" she promptly inquired, when his cheery greeting had been answered. "It isn't one of those collapsible canoes?"

"Something of that description," he assured her. "But whether anything by way of braces will make it serviceable or not is rather dubious."

She assisted at once to straighten it out, and watched him eagerly.

"It's something anyway, isn't it?" she said. "It's worth attempting to repair?"

He smiled. "I've got to make a try."

"If I could only get your breakfast while you work!" she said. "Do you think it barely possible there is anything I could cook?"

The brightest of pleasure's beams were in his eyes.

"There's plenty of fine fresh air." He could almost have wished they two were actually cast away upon a desert island—if just everything were right.

A flush of exquisite color crept to her cheeks as she lost her gaze in his. Then she glanced away towards the house.

"I haven't hunted thoroughly, while you were up and doing all these things. I might find something, after all. I'm going to see."

He dropped his end of the boat.

"Wait, we'll hunt together."

But the search availed them nothing. If the men who had been here waiting for Vail had provided themselves with anything to eat, there was nothing to show for it now. It was equally certain the house had contained nothing edible before their advent that would save the life of a mouse. A well of good water near the door afforded a drink from a can.

"The one thing to do," said Vail, at last, "is to mend that boat, if practicable, and get to the nearest help."

The doubts that Barbara entertained were manifested now, as they returned to the canvas boat.

"Suppose it should only hold one? It doesn't seem large or very strong. If you had to go alone, you would try to hurry back?"

He looked at her steadily.

"Would you be brave enough to wait?"

"What else could I do?"

"It's large enough for two, I'm sure of that," he told her, reassuringly. "The problem is to brace it up and make it hold anything at all."

"I know I can help," she told him. "Just tell me what to do."

There was ample employment for them both. Vail cut the first of the slender, pliant braces he should need, using his knife on the suitable shrubs and trimming each slip of its branches. Barbara then succeeded to this portion of the labor, while Julian lashed the ribs in place with bits of cord and rope.

It was not a short or easy task to wet and force the old misshapen mass of canvas back to the lines on which it had been designed. It required bracing from end to end and across every foot of its width. Where the wrinkles had been for unrecorded months the material was weak. What ropes and cords the former boathouse supplied were frequently useless from decay.

Barbara plied the half-dulled knife till her hands were blistered anew. Her muscles ached, her arms were scratched and bruised. Nevertheless, she continued her part with a blithesomeness of spirit and an earnestness of purpose that only real joy could sustain. As a matter of fact both she and Vail were inordinately happy. For at least the hour they were helpmates, Fate's castaways, flung here alone on an island where each was indispensable to the life and well-being of the other. Moreover, the sun was warm, the air was sweet, and the primitive tang of

earth and sea was stirring the blood of their pulses.

Back and forth, from the shrubs to the boat, Barbara gladly sped. She gave the product of her labor to the man, and their eyes and fingers met. Her nature rejoiced at the skill and strength his hands were displaying as he wrought. She marveled at the cleverness, dexterity, and cunning exemplified as he forced the stiff and wrinkled material back to the shape he desired.

They worked there for hours together, sometimes silently, both engrossed, and sometimes with helpful words. But whether they spoke or exchanged no speech, the deep, overmastering current of something too vast for expression or even understanding swept them ecstatically onward, forgetful of all the fevered world.

It was nearing noon when at length Vail announced he could do no more for the craft. What he had by then was a stoutly braced and stiffened framework of good tough withes over which the canvas was fairly well shaped and stretched. This he was readily enabled to carry to the shore, that was barely a stone's toss away.

Two of the broken oars, afforded by the mass of junk, he selected for use as paddles. Then with a battered lard can, taken aboard in case the need for bailing out water should arise, he pushed out and leaped aboard the craft, to give it its first official trial.

Then he drove it back to the beach. The wind

was towards the second island, visible down the bay. In such a boat he felt it unsafe to attempt up-wind navigation.

"Well, little friend, get in," he said, "—for better or for worse."

Her heart was fluttering with doubt, but, meeting his eyes with a smile of trust, she embarked, and they drifted from the shore.

CHAPTER XIX

A DESPERATE CHANCE

A FEW drops of water promptly entered the boat, where the paint on the canvas had cracked. For a moment Vail merely sat there, watching for leaks with the craft now fully weighted.

He was not entirely assured by the bulging appearance of places made weak by former folds, yet on the whole the shell of cloth bore the pressure remarkably well. And, inasmuch as disaster and slow starvation confronted them here, the present adventure was imperative, despite unpromising conditions.

He took up one of the paddles, and Barbara did the same. There was no such thing as shirk in all her nature. The breeze determined their direction, but neither knew, as a matter of fact, where lay the burg of Hackett Tides. The nearest land was the distant island, towards which the wind would assist.

They rode like the merest shell upon the ripples of the bay, Barbara paddling like a little Amazon, and no less excited and far more happy than before.

"If only I could have given you a good hearty breakfast first," she said, "it would be rather jolly, after all!"

She was up toward the bow, where he could watch

her every movement and glory in her sturdy strength and pose. He had never believed it possible for a man to compass the riotous joy that continued to increase in his veins.

"Aren't you as hungry as I?" he inquired. "It was up to me, as a Robinson Crusoe of genuine resource, to shoot some game, or catch some fish, or at least find some mussels or oysters."

She was quite serious.

"But, you see, unless you got something to eat on the shore, last evening, you have starved much longer than I."

"You haven't taken time to tell me where you were," he answered. "You spoke of a room where you were locked. How did you manage to escape?"

"I dropped down from the window, on a roof, then got in a tree, and—I guess I fell from the lowest branch to the ground."

"You *guess* you fell?"

"I didn't stop at the time to think of it, really. I was horribly frightened, I must confess, and I ran as fast as I could go."

"To find a boat?"

"Oh! it wasn't much trouble to find the boats, but how in the world I ever found the island I never expect to know!"

What a new sensation of pleasure and admiration he experienced as he pictured the brave little figure escaping by roofs and trees, to search the landings for a boat with which to brave the bay, alone, and row till she came to his side!

In all his life there had never been a service so sweet or courageous. His thoughts had never before entertained this delight of comradeship or understood its ties. A cycle of years might fail to glorify a love as his had been goldened within the past few hours. He could not resist a momentary dwelling on the subject.

"It was perfectly incredible, what you did, but—Barbara, why did you come?"

"Why, because I—— Just because you——" She paddled with extra vigor, adding, haltingly, "Because—you and I—are friends. You've called me one—and of course I had to prove it."

"I called myself *your* friend."

"Yes—that's just exactly it! I mean you're the only one—— How far do you suppose we've gone?"

"Too far to turn back," he answered, smilingly, and they were silent for a while.

Julian presently took the can and bailed out a portion of the water. From a dozen little cracks, nearly rotten through its fabric, the canvas boat was leaking. The wind had slightly freshened, and, while it helped to float them towards their goal, it likewise raised more turbulent waves than the craft could securely weather.

"Don't wear yourself out," said Vail, resuming his paddle. "You've done far more than your share."

She rested for a moment, while he drove the boat ahead. It still seemed very far indeed to the island

towards which they were forging. She was waxing faint and weak from hunger, yet scorned to complain, or exhibit the slightest sign that might discourage him.

"Wouldn't it be a joke," she said, "if there's no one on the place where we are going?" Her paddle was plying as before.

"Immense," said Vail. "I don't understand why we see no boats in the bay."

They paddled steadily until the island ahead was less than a mile away, showing trees but no sign of a house.

Vail abruptly ceased at his labor.

"Listen a minute, Barbara. . . . It's a motor-boat, I'm sure."

Their craft swung about and drifted on the wind, and the waves pounded softly on its quarter. Vail and the girl both scanned the bay as far as they could see, without result. Yet down with the breeze, as they rocked on the tide, came the unmistakable "putt-putt" of a gasoline discharge with a pulsing that indicated speed.

Barbara found it first.

"Isn't that something, way back there by our island?" she inquired. "You don't suppose it's someone after us?"

Vail stood up, and strained the cloth till one of the leaks was enlarged.

"It's a motor-boat with a bright-red band from stem to stern."

"Bright red?" repeated Barbara. "I heard them

say last night, while I was listening, that the *Red Streak* was the fastest boat around and cheap to hire. They couldn't have meant——"

Julian faced her promptly.

"You are sure of that? They called a boat the *Red Streak?*"

He did not await her reply, but promptly sat down in his place, to resume the paddle.

"We can beat them yet! We've got to beat them, little friend! We're small to find and hard to see and the wind and tide are with us!"

"Then you think——"

"We'll take no chances! If you're tired, rest a little bit—and bail. They'll never catch us in the world!"

He was far less assured than he tried to make her believe. He glanced at the water, swashing about in the hold of their frail canvas shell, with added apprehension. A leak he had not thought so large was trickling now instead of dripping. That his standing up had opened a crack he took no time to deduce. To drive ahead with all his strength was the one important task.

Barbara bailed, in silent obedience, glancing back at his set face once, to smile in her brave little way. It gave him new resolution—and then she paddled as before.

A steadily rising, clearer punctuation of the breeze was all the indication Vail required that the boat behind was in pursuit. He swept the rough water powerfully, flashing his oar-blade in the sun like

a Viking born for the seas. It was splendid, a stirring spectacle of two young striplings of Neptune's world exerting their strength together!

But the strain on the boat began to tell as it cleaved through the rougher billows. All of its leaks increased and new ones appeared, as Julian watched —and sweated. He could feel the rapid gaining of the fiery *Red Streak* and was certain his craft had been sighted.

How long their superhuman efforts to reach the island ahead of the motor could be sustained he could not pause to reflect. How long this cracking, rotted shell could remain afloat seemed far more important to them now. And yet, if they actually reached the shore of the island—now looming momentarily nearer—what shelter, or means of defense, might its meager extent afford?

"Stop again, Barbara, and bail," he said, in his quiet manner. "They'll never catch us now."

She made no reply, but worked with the can in a thoroughly businesslike manner. She, too, had noted the increasing leaks—and the gaining of the boat in pursuit. She had hourly expected the men to come, a fear she had hidden from Vail. She was far better posted than he on the need of her former captors to take her into custody again.

Her heart was beating as a frightened bird flutters its wings. That the boat would hold together long enough to carry them to land she greatly doubted. But she bailed in apparent calm.

Vail plied his paddle more hotly as a fresh gush of

wind swept the motor-boat's sharpened fusilade to his ears. It seemed as if his breath and strength must utterly fail in a moment.

Once more, neglecting much of the water that slopped about their feet, Barbara helped him to paddle.

"If I only had a gun!" breathed Julian. "To be so utterly helpless!"

Like an answer flung in retort across the waves came a sharp, clear report, and then a ball, that sang as it sped by their ears.

Julian lurched as a buffeting wave interfered with his stroke, and the strained gap opened wider in the canvas.

A purling stream came jutting in beside his feet. And, as if the racking and straining had endured beyond its age, the canvas broke at all the creases where tiny cracks were spread.

"I'd bail," he said, and Barbara bailed, while he labored like an engine.

Yard after yard he drove the doomed craft forward. The men in pursuit were still reasonably far behind. Then an exclamation broke from Julian's lips.

"There's a motor-boat at the island!".

Barbara looked, her heart madly leaping with excitement.

Not only was a long, slim motor-boat in sight, around the point towards which they were heading, but also a man in khaki suit was standing on the forward deck, obviously watching the race.

"Get up your anchor, man!" bawled Vail, at the top of his voice. "We need your help!"

The man was instantly galvanized and began to work like a fiend.

"I can't—I can't bail it fast enough!" said Barbara, suddenly.

"Paddle!" said Vail. "I'll swim!"

He was overboard almost instantly, and swimming by the boat.

Barbara caught up her oar.

"Oh, why—oh, why did you—— Julian!"

In the stress of the moment he smiled at her, out of the sea.

"I love you. If only one can reach the shore——"

A swirl of the tide embraced them in its might and hastened them in towards the beach. Julian's feet were on the sand beneath the waves. He drove the boat before him irresistibly while it was filling to the brim.

Barbara leaped out and waded. Their craft went down while the two were scrambling up the sands. The girl was falling from exhaustion. Vail caught her up in his powerful arms, lifted her bodily out of the tide, and strode through the froth, like a dripping young god, to carry her over the beach.

"Let me down! We've got to run!" she cried. "I'm all right, Julian—please!"

He placed her down, but held to her hand as they darted forward to board the boat where the stranger had run in beside a rocky ledge that answered in lieu of a pier.

He helped them to scramble in the cockpit, like two winded creatures from the deeps.

"Don't wait! Don't wait for anything!" said Vail, dripping brine like a sieve. "I'll pay you your price if you'll beat those chaps to shore or run them on the rocks and sink their boat!"

"Huh!" said the man, who had shown some agility already; and, pouncing on his engine, he suddenly filled the air with detonations, backed the boat from the place, and sent a shudder of power and eagerness through all the hull as he gave her full speed ahead.

A yell and a shot came from across the water. The *Red Streak*, barely five hundred yards away, was flinging aside a snarling froth—and the race down the bay was on.

CHAPTER XX

A NAVAL ENGAGEMENT

TWO things Barbara noted. The boat they were on was the *Kelpie*, and the island was barren of buildings.

Neither fact was important now, with that sinister projectile behind them spraying the sea in its flight, for, despite the speed, vibration, and noise developed by their own swift-racing craft, it appeared the *Streak* was gaining.

It seemed like cleaving the sunshine and sea together as the *Kelpie* settled down by the stern, flung up her nose and rushed with a thunder of exploded gas through the opal and emerald wall that rose to be cut and laid open by her bow.

The wind, that had fanned them from the rear, appeared to have been reversed. It rushed upon them full of rainbows, to sting with the chill of spray. The long, slender sea-hound steadied amazingly, so far as side-wise motion was concerned. She was all a mighty quiver of energy, however, that was tuned to the gatling-like exhaust.

No one attempted to speak against the noise, but all watched backward, tense with straining nerves, to note the position of the *Streak*. The end of the

island swept to the rear, with no one to give it attention. The boat behind discharged another shot.

The report was drowned in the roar. A puff of smoke and the leap of spray where the bullet impinged, were the signs that Julian noted. He went to the man who ran the boat and shouted in his ear.

"Any pistols or guns aboard?"

The man shook his head, but pointed to a locker beneath a seat.

Julian had it open promptly and dragged out a small brass cannon, such as a yacht employs to fire a conventional salute. It was modern, a breach-loading toy that accommodated shells about like a ten-bore gun. A number of these mere blanks containing only powder, were strewn about in the place.

Vail took a shell and the gun to the stern and fired, for moral effect. The answer was uncomfortably prompt—another ball from the craft behind, that was certainly gaining on their lead.

The *Kelpie's* skipper was watching, silently. He had asked no questions, demanded no explanations, interposed no objections to making this mad retreat. It was none the less evident, however, he not only fevered to beat the *Streak*, but was galled to find her eating up his wake.

He did everything that ingenuity and goaded pulses could suggest, but their speed was the *Kelpie's* best.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes of terrific noise, the lash of spray, and torpedoing straight for the shore

gave the *Streak* a menacing gain. Two water comets, steaming the wave-crests as they sped, could have seemed no more like lawless visitors, sent to plow up the calm of the bay.

Julian, glancing hurriedly about, for anything loose with which to load the otherwise useless cannon, got two mental impressions at once. One was of several feet of small brass chain, loosely wrapped in a length of copper wire. The other came like a series of blurs, where something shot past in the water.

Then a jolt that shook the *Kelpie* to her stem gave them all a start of apprehension. In less than half a minute their speed had dropped a third.

The screw had struck on the branch of a tree that was floating in the bay. It had broken off one of its blades.

The groan that escaped the silent skipper was lost in the deafening exhaust. He looked at Vail, and the two understood, as Barbara felt from their glances.

Wild yells of triumph and more of the shots came piercing through the wind from behind. The men in the *Streak* had seen the halt where the *Kelpie* limped onward from pursuit.

Vail made a dive for the wad of chain, which he found was in several pieces. One of these he quickly wrapped with the wire that bound them all together. What he thus formed was a two-inch length of links that would just barely slip in the cannon.

His face was grim as he loaded the piece for war.

Not a single face was visible in the sinister *Streak*, that was ramming down in triumph upon them.

Steadily narrower became the gap between the pursued and pursuers. It seemed as if nothing on earth could prevent the *Streak* from capturing its prey. It was certainly less than eighty yards away, and coming on with meteoric velocity, when Julian fired his gun.

He had aimed it high, aware that the chain would prove a poor projectile. But he hoped to get them at the water-line and let the sea in to their motor.

The little brass ordnance leaped in fury when it joined its report to the din.

The shot went home as true as a die, but higher than Vail had expected. He saw where it hit them, plainly. It tore a hole as big as his fist through their prow, alongside of their stem.

But it seemed to have little effect. It was fully a foot above their water-line and must have ranged almost straight for their motor.

Julian ran to load again, while more shots came raining from the rear. Then the skipper abruptly flung off his cap and stamped upon it in glee. He yelled out something fraught with joy, but not a word was comprehended.

Barbara clutched at Julian's sleeve and merely cried to him:

"Look!"

Julian rose and cast a glance at the *Streak* that no longer streaked. One of the men had clambered forward, to examine the hole in the prow. The mis-

sile fired from Julian's piece had ripped out the bottom of their gasoline tank and their motor had ceased its roaring.

The "bone in their teeth" was relinquished, for the race of the *Streak* was done.

Shots, curses, yells, and futile ragings sped on to overtake the *Kelpie*. The broken propeller churned triumphantly, despite the lessened speed, and the skipper finally closed his exhaust and turned to Vail with a grin.

"What did you do?"

"Don't know," said Vail. "But I loaded with chain and think I reached their solar plexus. Is there anything on board we could eat?"

Again as before the man merely waved to a locker. He was a silent, eccentric individual.

Julian found a pail of lunch, and, with no more ado, sat down with Barbara at the stern, to help her devour every morsel.

At one o'clock they came to the pier that served the town of Silver Rill, where Julian's car had been stored. The almost wordless skipper of the *Kelpie* was sorry to bid them adieu.

"If you'll tell me your name," said Julian, "I'll send you a check for twice what you charge for your services and damage."

The skipper shook his head.

"Got a million now and don't know how to spend it."

Julian met his twinkling glance and felt he had come upon a brother. He held out his hand.

"At least you'll tell me your name?"

"It's Jim."

"Mine's Jule—I hope we'll meet again."

"And mine is Barbara," said the bright-eyed girl, whose smile overpaid him, he was sure, as he closed his hand upon her fingers.

With one accord she and Julian turned at the shore, to wave him a last farewell. Then he went again to his boat.

Vail, once more all eagerness, hastened at once to the town's one telephone, while Barbara waited, seated on a box.

He called up his New York office and finally got Broughton on the wire.

"This is Mr. Vail," he said. "I'm on my way home from a trip. . . . Yes, I'll be at the office in the morning. . . . Never mind Gardner just at present. . . . Broughton, I want you to attend to a personal matter for me, at once. . . . I want you to take the vase of flowers from my desk—flowers and all—faded or not—without disturbing anything—and carry it, just as it is, to your apartments. . . . Yes, wrap it up, of course. . . . Your own apartments, yes—till further orders. . . . I'll hold the wire till you tell me you've got it from the desk."

He sat for perhaps two minutes, holding the receiver to his ear.

"Hullo!" came the distant voice, at last, "is that you, Mr. Vail?"

"Yes, all right."

"The vase, Mr. Vail, is gone."

Vail felt a kick of his heart.

"The vase—you say it's gone?"

"Yes, sir. It's not on the desk."

Julian made an effort to pull himself together.

"All right. Much obliged. Good-by."

He hung up the instrument resignedly, fearing now his car might also be missing.

But the thieves had avoided the village garage and the car had been unmolested.

Then presently, still wet, but not chilled to positive discomfort, he settled, with Barbara, in the machine and headed for Gotham—and trouble.

CHAPTER XXI

SOME HALF-CONFESSIONS

IF Barbara's spirits flagged at last, with contemplations of things and inquiries still to be faced in New York, Vail was no less afflicted by a dread of affairs not yet approached as the space between themselves and the feverish town began to be diminished.

Out here in the open they had seemed on a different footing. The city and its cares had dimmed and their two selves only had counted. Fate, chance, and adventure had appeared about to weld their lives in one, and all else beyond was vague.

Julian knew there would be no time like this for the conference they must hold. He had put it all away from him, gladly, while events crowded thickly in their path, but facts there were he must face at last, if only for their mutual protection.

He almost wished New York might sink, taking with it to some bottomless depth all the crime and misery, treachery, fraud, intrigue, the mockery of life and love, and the poverty and woe with which it was seething day and night. He was certain no truer, purer little heart than Barbara had brought to the huge metropolis ever beat out the seconds of

a life. He was sure she was innocent of any intended wrong, despite all the things he remembered.

"Little friend," he said to her, at last, "who were the men in the *Streak?*"

She was thoroughly startled by the query.

"Why—I don't know—that is, except—— They must have been the men who put you in the cistern."

"Yes, I'm reasonably sure of that. But they had no reason for desiring to capture me again. They must have been after you, and the question arises—why?"

She very much wished to be absolutely frank. She met his glance unflinchingly, assured by the light in his eyes.

"I suppose they might be a little afraid of—things that they think I'll tell."

"And will you, Barbara?—There have been a lot of mysterious things I must inquire about—and perhaps the sooner the better."

"I'll tell you all I can," she answered, whitening a trifle and tucking his fur robe closer about her feet. "There are some things yet—— What shall I tell you first?"

"You know at least one of the men who captured me?"

She nodded. "I think so—at least he must have helped."

"Does he happen to be a tall, red-headed man—the one you were with at the house where you saw me on the stairs?"

"Yes, but I hope——"

"Did he also whistle you out of the house—at Mrs. Loomis's, twice?"

"He did, of course. You see, I couldn't help——" And she halted, looking in his eyes beseechingly.

His compassion and trust were not to be mistaken.

"The man isn't anything—anyone particularly dear in your life?" he asked her, eagerly. "Or is he someone you've been afraid to resist?"

She colored and dropped her gaze.

"He frightens me terribly—and then he promises—— Oh, please, isn't that one of the subjects—the parts you can leave a little longer?"

"I'd like to leave it all, but it's a pretty serious affair. Have you any idea why I was lured to that deserted island?"

"Not the slightest in the world." Her honesty was thoroughly convincing. "I'd like to know."

"You can't tell me first who he is—this red-headed man?"

"I'd rather not—if you'll trust me just a little." The tension of her nerves was obvious.

He felt he could trust her with his life, since her little hand had held it. Nevertheless, he required aid, and a clearing away of the mist—and worry lingered at his heart.

"You haven't told me whether or not he is very dear to you."

"Oh, he isn't! He isn't! There's no one so dear as—— There's no one, I mean, that's—— I hate him, if that's what you mean."

"Thank God!" he murmured, more to himself than to her. "Can you tell me why you disappeared and went to that house I was in?"

"He promised to help me get some things that—mean everything to me."

"There were things of yours in that house, of all houses in the town?"

"Why, I don't know what house it was. He took me there in a car. Is there anything wrong with the house?"

"Didn't you recognize the place?"

"Not in the least. We had only arrived when you called from above, and he caught me up and ran. You don't mean the house is yours?"

Julian almost smiled.

"Not exactly. What is it of yours that was there?"

She colored again.

"Just papers. If I ever get them, Mr. Vail, and they shouldn't prove——" She left it incompleted.

The personal equation was dominant at once with Vail.

"You've called me Julian before."

"Perhaps—when I was excited. I didn't intend to, of course."

He slowed down the car.

"Don't say that, Barbara, please. You haven't forgotten what I told you—when I had to get out of the boat?"

The exquisite fire that leaped to her eyes ignited trains of powder in his pulses.

"But you shouldn't have said it—you shouldn't," she protested. "Please—please pretend it didn't happen—or was just—excitement—like mine."

"But it wasn't, little friend. You must have felt it—known it—known——"

"But when I beg you, Julian—— There! I've gone and done it again!" She was laughing, with tears in her eyes.

"You don't mean, Barbara——"

"Please wait!" she interrupted. "If you knew what I—knew things—knew more about—— Oh, please, please let's be friends again—just friends, till perhaps—perhaps I pass out of your life!" She said that last with smileless lips that she forced to pronounce unwelcome words.

Vail was momentarily silenced, meeting the look in her eyes. He had never loved her more than now, when she seemed to be receding from his vision. He was mystified and magnetized, reckless yet restrained, and held away by gulfs impassable, feeling once more the obscuring mist arise to enshroud her where she sat.

Her half-formed admissions, halted revelations, and emotional distress filled his heart with apprehension.

"Do you wish to pass out of my life?" he said, his own face white and set. "You can answer that?"

The tears sprang again to her eyes.

"Oh, but you won't insist on an answer—not to-day?"

"What is it," he inquired, "that weaves between

you and me? Why can't you tell me, and let me try to help? Don't you know I'll be your friend, all through?"

She met his gaze fearlessly again.

"That is the dearest hope of my life."

"Then give me a chance to prove it. I wonder if you even know how much you need a friend?"

Her frightened look returned.

"You mean that I'm in danger?—some danger I haven't discovered?"

"It couldn't be otherwise. From the first I've doubted that you could know how much this business means."

"Trapping you in the well?"

"A great deal more than that—and it's time you knew." He saw her brown eyes glow with girlish misgivings, but resolved he must still go on. "You were sent to me in a box, do you know why?"

"Perhaps someone intended to give me a genuine friend."

It went to his heart like wine of roses. He smiled.

"Ah! if that had been the only reason! Barbara, haven't you read the accounts in the papers of that Indian Maharajah, murdered and robbed of his gems?"

"I noticed a little about it." Her interest was mild.

He steeled his heart to continue to the end.

"The principal jewel stolen was a ruby, a sacred stone of exceptional size and worth."

"Yes, I think I remember reading that."

"Do you also recall that your shoes, that you left at my office, got wet as they lay on the desk?"

"It couldn't have hurt them in the least."

He was silent for a moment, passing a team in the road. The car was running with a purr that barely sounded to their ears.

"It didn't exactly hurt your shoes, but one of the heels came off."

She gave no suspicious sign.

"Why, what an absurd—— It couldn't have been nailed!"

"No, it was glued, and the wetting did the trick. —That heel was hollow, and—what do you think was inside?"

"Inside the heel of my shoe?" Her surprise was thoroughly sincere. "Why, but how—— I don't understand——"

"The heel was hollowed, as I said—and it held that stolen ruby."

She flung out her hand upon his.

CHAPTER XXII

A STARTLING DÉNOUEMENT

FOR a moment there was silence between them, as they rode along in the car. Then Barbara spoke.

"My shoe! A stolen ruby in my shoe? Someone was murdered and robbed and then—the ruby was put in my heel?"

"Exactly as I have told you, Barbara, and, therefore——"

Her grip on his arm was tightened. Her eyes were fixed and wide. Horror, surprise, and questioning were depicted in her glance.

"No wonder then that Willard—— So that was why he made me tell—— You—Julian—what did you think? You didn't believe that I——"

"I found it out that day," he interrupted. "Have I acted as if I suspected, believed—— What is it you started to say? Willard is Willard who? And what did he make you tell?"

She was greatly perturbed.

"I—I—— If just you wouldn't ask me now. I didn't mean—— Please tell me what happened then."

"I placed your property in the safe, as I told

you at the time—and that night the place was entered and someone stole the shoes."

She was intensely white.

"They got the ruby and all?"

"I had placed the ruby elsewhere. It was saved. —They got me down there in the cistern to force me to tell where it was."

She closed her eyes and reeled with weakness. Her hand had fallen from his arm and hung there limply on the robe.

He held the wheel in the grip of his right hand and caught her drooping wrist.

"So you see, little friend," he continued, eager to reassure her mind, "we need each other's help.—You're not going to faint?"

She shook her head, grasping at her will to hold it steady.

"I knew you knew nothing of all this affair," he added, solicitously, "but at least you know some of the men concerned and the desperate means they employ.—You risked your life to save me, and you know I'd give you mine. We've got to work together, for detectives are on the case."

She started and stared at him again.

"Detectives? But they don't suspect *I* stole the ruby and hid it, or murdered anyone? Oh, why did anyone mix it up with us—with me—and drag me in? But when they got you down in the well—you told them where to go and get the stone?"

His face was slightly flushed.

"I waited till the hole was nearly full of water,

running in from the bay. Then—— I'm afraid I hadn't the courage to die for a sacred ruby."

She clung to his hand abruptly, with a fierce and passionate desire to shield him both from harm and his own bitter self-accusation.

The silence between them was prolonged, as each was absorbed in a cycle of thoughts that revolved with dizzying velocity. At length she appeared to realize what her tense little hand was about. She released her grip and applied her strength to the needs of further questions.

"Do you think they've got the ruby now?"

"I 'phoned my office for information. It looks as if they have."

"Then what will happen next?"

"I wish I knew. I wish that could end the whole affair. But what the detectives may do in the case is more than I can tell."

Her alarm surged back as before.

"You don't really think they'd mix me up in the trouble again?—Oh! perhaps you've had to tell——"

"I've told them nothing, Barbara, but one clever man has guessed mighty close to the truth! Don't you see—don't you understand at last——"

She interrupted swiftly.

"But I hadn't anything to do with all these things! I don't know how it ever happened! I don't know what was done to me, or how I came in the box! I haven't stolen anything, and I can prove—— Oh, what am I going to do?"

"What can you prove?" he demanded, eagerly.

"What can you tell me that will clear this matter up? Who are you shielding, Barbara? Is it someone you dearly love?"

"Oh, please, please wait—don't ask me now," she begged him, wistfully. "I'm so frightened—— If you knew how dear he is to—— Everything, everything—my whole life and happiness—— I've needed all the help I could get. And Willard, of course—— Oh, I can't, I can't explain!"

She had blurted out so many fragmentary admissions, all creating confusion in his mind, that Julian's thoughts were filled with all manner of despair. Ghosts of his older doubts and wraiths of the new swam mistily through it all. He was certain of one thing only—he loved her in spite of himself—loved her, believed her, and gave her his trust absolutely.

Yet the thing he had feared more than all the rest seemed fully confirmed at last: There was someone dearer than himself for whom she could bear the blackest sort of suspicion. Twice she had mentioned this "Willard," and yet had declared she hated him with all her sturdy might.

"I must ask you first to be fair to yourself," he told her now, judicially. "If there is any way on earth for you to prove your innocence of all knowledge of the ruby and how it came in your possession, for Heaven's sake, Barbara, exercise it now! Give me a chance to help you—help myself—satisfy the detectives, who will certainly trace the stone!"

"I don't know how it came to be in my shoe," she repeated. "I don't see why it was put there. I

don't know why I was sent to you, and I wish I hadn't been at all, since it's making you all this trouble."

"Oh, don't say that!" he begged her, fervently. "I'm glad, in spite of it all! But you started to say you could prove your innocence. It's proved already to me, but why not give me all the *facts* and let me defend you absolutely?"

She met his gaze courageously, but no color returned to her face.

"I can't prove anything—just yet. Perhaps when I've seen—— If I only knew what to do!"

He abandoned all hope of getting behind the something that she steadfastly withheld. He took another tack.

"You won't try to see these criminals—or Willard? You won't run away again and put yourself in their power?"

"I don't suppose they'll want me again, now that they've got the ruby."

He was well-nigh aghast, it sounded so much like confession of her connection with the crime.

"But you told me, Barbara, you did not know the ruby was in your shoe."

Her eyes were perfectly frank.

"I didn't. But you tell me it was, and all that Willard—all he wanted to know when he came to Mrs. Loomis's was what I had done with my shoes. He made me tell him everything that happened and where you had put them away."

"But he came again next morning, while I was on the 'phone. What was he after then?"

"Why, nothing. I'd ask him to come,—I mean he had promised to help—— That's the part I'd rather not tell."

Julian smiled, in a mirthless way that she felt masked a silent rebuke. It was merely his helplessness.

"How long shall I be obliged to wait for this information?"

She avoided his searching eyes.

"You may never get the information—perhaps."

"You don't mean to say——"

"Oh, it isn't my wish!" she protested, passionately. "It isn't a thing that anyone can help! But if I go away—and you never hear of me again—I want you to know, believe, understand—it was the only thing I could do!"

Despite the sickening doubts that assailed him, mind and heart, he could not consent to think of her slipping from his life. Such love as his knows nothing of reason, nothing of cause, and cares nothing for what has been.

"But you wouldn't do that—not after such a day as we have passed together! Where do you mean to go to-night, after we've had our dinner?"

"I hadn't thought." She smiled at her helpless position. "I haven't any place to go, of course—unless it's back to Mrs. Loomis."

"I'll take you there," he told her, promptly, re-

membering one thing more. "But where did you pass the night when I saw you at the ball? How did you happen to be there, Barbara? What did it mean, that gown and all?—and the woman who took you away?"

She flushed to the tips of her ears.

"They just dressed me up and gave me that name and took me there, that's all. I told you I didn't know why. I don't—unless—it might have been—to meet Mr.—Sir Hugh Pearson."

"You had never met him previously?"

"Never in my life? I don't know anything about him."

"Where did you get the gown?"

"I think it must have been hired, jewels and all."

"Who was the woman? You probably stayed at her house."

"I did. She said her name was Mrs. Snow, but I think that name was assumed."

"Assumed?"

"A servant called her 'My Lady' by mistake, and a lot of English letters came, and I think she is someone important. She doesn't speak as we do in the least."

"She wanted you to meet Sir Hugh."

"She thought it might be pleasant."

He was instantly alert.

"And was it, Barbara?"

"I don't know. I was too excited, seeing you."

Her answer might have been complimentary or just the other way. He pursued the subject further.

"Do you expect to meet him again? Did Mrs. Snow, or Lady Someone, invite you to stop at her house?"

"She seemed to think it was settled that I would."

Vail was deeper than ever in the fog.

"And you think you may?"

The glance that had played such havoc already with his heart was glowing again in her two brown eyes as she turned them steadily upon him.

"I think I prefer Mrs. Loomis's and—— I mean I'd rather not."

They were passing through one of the suburbs of Brooklyn. Their journey was nearing its end.

Julian, thoroughly engrossed in the latest revelations of Barbara's adventures, had given no heed to a pair of policemen, mounted on wheels, who had fallen in behind him in the road, a mile at the rear, to follow him on to the town.

It was not until he swung at last into one of the streets devoted almost wholly to business that his attention was drawn to a squad of policemen, actively moving out in the road and waving their hands for him to halt.

A limousine car was standing by the curb, before a precinct station. Vail had no more than stopped his car than an amazing thing occurred.

A veiled, excited woman, clutching a large policeman by the arm, came running to the curb.

"Barbara! My little girl!" she cried.

Half a minute later, wholly dazed and confounded by the surprise of the situation, Vail was dragged

bodily out of his seat, and arrested on a charge of abduction. He was taken at once inside the station.

Barbara, strangely helpless and silenced by something the woman said or did, as she weepingly clasped her in her arms, was still too astonished or frightened to speak, when, after a time of great confusion and excitement at the place, she found herself hopelessly parted from Vail and at last in the limousine car.

Then the car escaped the curious throng, gathered from all directions, and was driven away, for the bridge and New York, at the limit of speed regulations.

CHAPTER XXIII

IRIS WRITES A LETTER

IT was useless for Vail to storm, protest, and threaten when at last he recovered his normal wits and demanded an explanation. To all intents and purposes he had been "captured with the goods." There was no one at the station to whom his name and connections meant the smallest thing in the world. He could claim no rights or ownership in Barbara Lee, either by legal or blood relationship. He had no intention of blurting out the truth as to how she had spent the night. He was helpless in the hands of the "law."

It was fully an hour before he could manage to hunt down Faxon, Chief of the New York Police, by means of the telephone, and invoke his official aid. Even then, through required precautions, he was still obliged to wait for a time that seemed interminable for the Chief to make sure there was some mistake and to send instructions and guarantees that restored him to his freedom. He was finally permitted to climb in his car and resume his journey alone.

Nothing more baffling or galling than this had occurred in all the incredible succession of events piled in upon him since his birthday "present" ar-

rived. He was not at all certain it was safe or wise to demand police assistance to discover where Barbara had gone.

The more he thought upon the matter the more clearly he realized the extraordinary position in which he found himself. Not only must he exercise every possible precaution to protect the name of the vanished girl who had risked her life and all to save him from hideous death, but he could not even take this present affair to Garrison without revealing facts too likely to involve her with the law.

Not even the satisfaction of knowing the woman who had lodged the complaint of abduction against him was vouchsafed his angered mind. The name she gave the officers was false, as he was thoroughly aware. No view had been permitted of her face, either during or after his arrest.

With a sense of chagrin, he confessed to himself that Barbara must have consented to some of these proceedings for the coup to have met with success. Had she cried out but once that the woman of the veil was an impostor, the sergeant must certainly have listened long enough to investigate the affair. Either through fright or acquiescence she had meekly submitted to the bold design without so much as a word.

She was hiding something vital, by confession repeatedly made. It was equally certain this present dénouement could have happened only through contrivance between the woman and the fellows at Hackett Tides. No one else under Heaven could have

telephoned ahead that he and Barbara were coming. Being unaware that all the way down a woman had followed his car, he made no calculations involving that factor in the case.

The whole affair aroused his indignation more and more, especially as he realized there was nothing he could do, either to-night or in the morning, to find where Barbara had gone. Without the aid of professional detectives, whose services and attention to the case he desired to avoid, he would simply be obliged to wait till she could send him word—which he feared she might not do.

All the way back to the city he vainly cudgeled his brain for counter moves and nursed his wrath at the woman whose coup had been so astonishingly accomplished. At length, half-starved and wholly disgusted, he came to his own apartments, leaving his car at the curb.

A number of letters had accumulated here, two of which came from Iris Puryn, while Enid had sent no less than four. All were indifferently tossed aside, unopened, while Julian hastened to bathe and dress in fresher garments.

Seated at last for his dinner, he waved away the flock of evening papers, that once before had destroyed his appetite, and, with many a pang of disappointment as he looked at the empty chair where Barbara should be seated, made a hearty attack on the soothing wines and viands.

The old unrest attacked him afterwards. It was modified, however, by a firm determination to leave

no energy unemployed till Barbara was found. The question was—how to go to work?

He was startled by a sudden thought that perhaps the Mrs. Cree, who had worked the first deceits on Barbara, might have been the woman in the veil. In this event it would not be wholly impossible that both had retreated to the house of iron men.

He presently argued this was not very likely, after all. The house in question was not only under suspicion, it was likewise uncomfortably neighbored by the house of the ruby crime.

A dozen times he halted an impulse to seek for Garrison by 'phone. He was not yet prepared to reveal all the facts that Garrison must certainly possess to work without groping in the case.

He arose at last, and, securing a copy of one of the evening papers, had his car sent away to an uptown garage and returned to his room for a rest.

Once more he shuffled over the letters that lay upon the table. Many were invitations, such as scores of eager young swains would have given their world to secure. They were pushed aside and neglected. Then came the first of the letters that Iris had recently mailed.

It was rather more humble than Julian had expected. It contained no scolding, but instead referred to their happier times of the past. It desired him to come to her soon.

The second, bearing a special-delivery stamp, and mailed that same afternoon, was of quite another tenor. Its opening paragraph was all Vail required

to apprise him that something had occurred of which he was still uninformed.

"Dear Mr. Vail," it read: "you may perhaps judge of my chagrin to learn of your latest mark of disrespect to me and your disregard of all conventions, as set forth in the public press to-day. I hasten at this earliest possible moment to retract whatever I may have written in an earlier letter. I need hardly inform you that, unless you immediately explain your conduct, I shall be obliged to cancel all relationship and obligations without further discussion.

"It is so thoroughly inconceivable that you would be guilty of *all* that is charged in this disgusting fashion that I shall dare to hope for an immediate and convincing denial of the entire story from your lips. You will also kindly communicate with me immediately upon receipt of this letter. I regret that all efforts to reach you by telephone have proved unsuccessful, which will not be surprising if, as alleged, you have been away from the city for considerably more than twenty-four hours."

Vail lost no time in spreading open the *Star*. The account he sought was sufficiently prominent.

Under headlines like sinister bars across two columns of the sheet was a vague but sensational account of his story and that of Barbara, amazingly complete.

There was not a name mentioned in the story. It

simply alleged that a "wealthy and distinguished young scion of society" had recently been made a present of a living doll with whom he had fallen in love. The matter, perhaps intended for a joke, had taken all concerned with surprise, by its serious and sentimental developments. The social world was partially aghast and partially convulsed with amusement at the contretemps, which had culminated at noon, the day before, when the said young social lion had suddenly left the city, it was said, to be secretly married to the "charming little gift, so lightly and playfully supplied."

The entire affair, the account continued, was vibrant with romance, shrouded in mystery, and rich in new topics for gossip. It was the latest sensation of the ennuied set and provided new suggestions for decoying Cupid to the wealthy ranks where his footprints were lamentably few.

Every item and comment was two or three times repeated, by way of expanding the narrative to give it impressive space. The salient facts were there, substantially accurate. There was even a statement that the "Benedict" in question had gone from Gotham alone in his car to "lead his fair bride to the altar" in some sunny nook of Long Island, where their honeymoon would suffer no intrusions. Loyal friends were guarding their secret, it added, against such time as regular congratulations might be appropriate and welcome.

There was no escaping the fact that Vail was denoted by the story. He made no attempt to evade

this obvious truth. His one consolation lay in the fact that neither his name nor Barbara's had actually been revealed. Concerning the tale's effect upon Iris Puryn he was not excessively worried. His annoyance had scarcely crystallized when a second *Star* sensation attracted his roving glance.

He had passed a scare head announcing

INDIAN MUTINY FOSTERED HERE!

His eye was caught by declarations below.

Sequel to Crime of the Great Gatama Ruby!

Stores of Rifles and Ammunition Discovered in Brooklyn, Purchased by the Murdered Maharajah for Rising Against British Rule!!!

CHAPTER XXIV

A DEEPER PLOT SUGGESTED

THE startling account, which by one of the strange fatalities of chance was printed next to the story of himself and Barbara, filled Vail with as much uneasiness as the original ruby crime. Not only did it establish the fact that far-reaching plots, more black and mysterious than ever, had developed in the case, but it clearly indicated a measure and degree of activity on the part of the metropolitan police that could not be ignored.

All the earlier sensations of the murder and theft were reviewed to arouse new excitement. Garrison's name was coupled with the latest discovery. The writer declared the town to be infested with secret-service officers, both from India and England, who were running this plot to earth, under personal orders and supervision of Sir Hugh Pearson, through whose special acumen the munitions had been found.

New and exhaustive efforts were now being prosecuted, added the story, to account for the ruby's disappearance, since rumors well confirmed from official sources indicated that the precious gem, together with lesser jewels, had been boldly removed from certain Indian temples, to be sold in New York for moneys to finance the plotted rebellion.

A coterie of Hindoo residents, banded in a secret order, and aided by a number of misguided English and American women, themselves clever spies and assistants, were suspected of complicity in this deathless intrigue, whereby it was hoped to wrest the supremacy of India from the hated English hand. It was already well established that money and power were abundant in the ranks of this conspiring organization.

The account was concluded with a statement that a concentrated effort to delve to the bottom of the whole affair had been rendered possible by the theft of the famous stone, many times previously stolen from its sacred setting and never left long untraced. There was just the slightest intimation that already a hint of the great gem's whereabouts was rife in some inner detective circles and that terror was at the vitals of those who were guiltily concerned.

Vail eagerly finished the account. The one particularly disturbing element for him was the shadow cast on Barbara by the things now newly revealed.

It seemed to him as plain as day that, whether a tool or principal, she was inextricably entangled with all this tissue of crime. She was doubtless employed as a spy—perhaps without her knowledge—and surely without her intention or desire. Upon this he insisted, with dogged, fanatical zeal. She must be—she had to be innocent of any deliberate association or sympathy with this coterie of thieves and conspirators, red to their shoulders with crime!

He was thoroughly convinced the papers she had

mentioned repeatedly as something lost or stolen were compromising documents which she knew she must recover and destroy. There could be no doubt she was wholly in the power of those in possession of her secret. Everything, half-confessed or fallen from her lips, confirmed this supposition. All her hints that she might be obliged to withdraw herself entirely from his ken contributed strength to his theory.

Could she clear herself from all her past, destroy the records of her doubtless enforced obedience to commands of those exacting her cleverness and services, she could come to him gladly with her love. But were the fates to order otherwise, deliver her up to the clutches of the law—— He could see, in his fancy, the brave little smile with which she would pass to some sickening fate with never a revelation of who she was, or an action to involve a guiltless friend.

He had felt she loved him—and he felt it still. His own surrender to the most exalted passion he had ever known was beyond his power of retrieving. He would love her always, for a loyal, fearless little comrade, though the whole world accuse her and condemn!

His strength was sapped by the thought of how she had met Sir Hugh Pearson at the ball, costumed like a princess of the blood. It was doubtless an effort to lure the man to the meshes set by those whose gains she must further. There was no such power on earth as woman's beauty—no such fatal

enticement invented since the year of One, to wreck not only trusting men, but nations and empires marked for doom and flung down at daintily slippered feet.

He sickened to think of the alacrity with which he himself had fallen a victim to her charms. It had doubtless all been planned for some deep-hidden reason he had been too blind to see. Yet his soul cried out in protest, counting her action in saving his life too splendid to be dimmed. She was not a heartless siren, mirroring girlish wistfulness and innocence. Her innocence was real! her friendlessness was genuine!—her generous, life-endangering labors, performed where mere bravery would not have been sufficient, could be no idle coquetries or devices to play upon his heart!

It was all some terrible machination that she had no choice to resist. It doubtless involved some relative, father, brother, or woman kin, to whom she was hopelessly bound. There was someone dear of whom she could not speak, as established by confessions already reluctantly made. There was always the red-headed Willard, whom she hated and likewise feared. Some secret he doubtless possessed.

Vail's thought conjured up the "Mrs. Snow," who had dressed Miss Lee and shown her at the ball. It was doubtless she who had worked the abduction device. He had no doubt that Barbara was with this woman now. But, granting the fact, what purpose was served by the knowledge? Not a word had Barbara revealed as to where Mrs. Snow resided. To

seek for a woman sufficiently clever to plan and execute her various coups was a task for the specialist, trained to the work—and to none of these could he go.

He made no plans as to what he should do in the morning. Some vague, disorganized resolution to champion Barbara's cause, conceal her secret, and possibly warn her of her danger was the most he could compass in his thoughts. He loved her, and, loving, gave some trust that nothing on earth could shake. For the rest—he could only grimly smile; there is no Fate but Fate.

The juxtaposition of the stories in the *Star* reminded him finally of Iris. A second perusal of her letter left him rather more satisfied than otherwise with the outcome of events. He wondered what Enid had written and why she had been so industrious as to double her sister's effort.

Assembling her epistles in the order of their mailing, as indicated by the cancellation marks, he discovered three to be the merest "sisterly" effusions anent the ball and trusting he was thoroughly well and had not too greatly regretted the evening spent as a truant to his "regular duties."

The fourth communication had been written since the publication of the story in the *Star*. Unlike those of Iris, Enid's comments on this affair were entirely sympathetic and defensive of his "high sense of honor and integrity." She called the entire narrative an absurd fabrication, adding that, although Iris and all the world should desert and scorn him,

her own unshaken faith would still remain while her friendship would rather increase than diminish. She trusted she might soon have an opportunity of assuring him of her steadfast regard in person, and desired him to spare himself from worry in a matter so obviously foolish.

It gave him another surprise, such as Enid had previously supplied. He was gratified, moreover, to know she had far more character than he had formerly imagined. Any friendly declaration was acceptable at such a time, even though not precisely understood. He admitted, however, he had never understood this older sister of the Puryn family, and dismissed her letter with no further speculation whatsoever.

But for two solid hours he paced the floor, despite great physical weariness, in the torment of thoughts that Barbara had aroused. Then at last he gave up and retired.

CHAPTER XXV

GARRISON'S REVELATIONS

VAIL was early at his office in the morning.

Beyond the fact that many unanswered letters and a number of unimportant telegrams had accumulated on the desk, there was nothing unusual about the place—save for the absence of his cartridge-shell vase with all that it had contained.

There were several memorandums to the effect that Garrison had called him on the telephone and desired to be informed when he returned. There were likewise a number of important messages from his brokers and fellow-supporters of B. & K. C. securities, all demanding urgent attention.

Broughton was promptly in requisition, not only concerning the various commercial developments of the railroad situation, but also respecting all visitors who had recently gained admission to the private sanctum.

He was certain there had been no visitors, since in the absence of his chief he had permitted no one to enter the room. Without particular mention of the vase of flowers, Julian confirmed his theory it had gone in some expert hands.

Gardner, he learned, had so far succeeded in breaking the prices on both the stocks and bonds of the

B. & K. C. R. R. that utter demoralization had seized its stanchest friends. Their frantic wires were carefully assorted in Broughton's private drawer. He delivered the batch like one who expects to be condemned as the bearer of evil tidings.

Vail ran through them rapidly, exhibiting no concern. The orders he gave, in his quick, incisive manner, made Broughton stand aghast. Not only was no support forthcoming to recoup what appeared like ruinous losses, but Vail's campaign resembled nothing so much as added effort to wipe the railroad out. There were orders he later delivered in private that might have been fatal to the confidential secretary, whose brain, after all, had comparatively narrow limitations.

The telephone rang while the schedule for the day was being especially prepared. It was Garrison's clerk who was on the wire, to make an appointment for his chief at the earliest possible moment.

"Tell Mr. Garrison to come at once," was Vail's reply. "I'll be free in fifteen minutes. He may come by my private door."

He resumed his work, but in less than five minutes he was called on the instrument again.

"Hullo! Mr. Vail?" inquired a voice he did not recognize. . . . "Chief Faxon wishes to see you for a moment in room sixteen ten, of this building."

Julian was startled, not only to know the Chief of Police was in the building at an hour so early, but likewise at a summons so wholly unexpected, even after all that had occurred.

"All right. Be up there at once." He added to Broughton, "Take this stuff and file it away in a special place, with an index of everything received."

He swept the entire mass of documents relating to the B. & K. C. R. R. into a shallow basket that Broughton carried away. Then, presently ascending in the elevator, Julian summoned an air of briskness and calm he was far from entertaining.

Bareheaded and hands in pockets, he walked the entire length of the hall on the sixteenth floor, glancing at the numbers on the doors. When he came in front of sixteen ten he found it quite barren of signs.

He knocked, but revealed no response. Fearing he might have misunderstood the number, he tried the knob. The door was locked. The room was evidently empty. Aware he might have made an error, he proceeded on to other doors beyond.

The next was as signless as the first, and firmly locked. The third was the office of an architect, who could give him no information. He returned to sixteen nine and eight, to receive no assistance from the lawyer's clerk and publisher's stenographer, to whom his queries were addressed.

Convinced he had blundered so hopelessly that nothing save a return to his office to await a new summons remained, he finally halted a black steel car and was lowered again to his floor.

He entered his office by his private door—then stood there dazed with surprise.

His cartridge-shell vase was standing on the desk!

Even the faded flowers were still intact, as if they had never been disturbed.

With a sudden realization that the call to an empty room above had been a ruse to get him away while the vase was being returned, he moved quickly forward, caught up the brass receptacle, and shook it with unnecessary violence.

The water inside was duly agitated—and something dully knocked upon the metal walls that emitted a muffled tinkle. Still unprepared to accept this evidence that the ruby was there as before, he took out the faded flowers, turned the water into a cuspidor, and a second later dropped the jewel in his palm, where it gleamed with fiery refulgence.

A conflict of emotions instantly resulted. There was quite as much uneasiness as there was of gratification in the mystery by which the stone had been returned. If for a moment he rejoiced that the thieves who had wrung the facts from him in the cistern had been foiled in their object, after all, he was keenly aware that the old responsibility of the ruby's possession had been thrust once more upon himself.

He had time for no more than mere flashes of thought on the subject when Garrison knocked on the private door and startled him anew.

Into the vase he dropped the stone, as if it had been red-hot. The faded flowers were likewise plumped into place. Back to the corner went the column of brass; then, with pen in hand, Vail swung wide the door and waved a species of salute.

"Come in, come in, you fearful specter of the

law," he said, with a smile. "Welcome to our city."

Garrison shook his outstretched hand and greeted him cordially.

"By Jove," he said, "your outing did you good. I never saw you looking fitter."

"You knew I'd been away?"

"I read the *Star*." He accepted a chair beside the desk.

Julian flushed a trifle.

"You don't believe all you read?"

"Not as a habit—even stories concerning myself."

"But that *Star* account of your new discoveries was true? This Indian mutiny, and all the rest—there was some little basis for that?"

"There was more than a little," Garrison confessed. "The chap who wrote up the story was dogging my heels, till he came to the find, as I fear he has done before. But that's too long a recital for this morning. I have barely ten minutes to spare. I am going now to Miss Lee."

Vail responded promptly with a rise.

"You have found out where she is?"

"No, I came to inquire of you. The time has arrived when delay will no longer answer." He was watching Vail with a level gaze as inscrutable as that of the sphinx.

Julian sank back in his chair.

"But, my dear criminologist, I haven't the least idea in the world where she may be."

Garrison felt he was telling the truth.

"But you were with her, down in the country?"

"I was, but I have lost her since. She has a way of disappearing—but it's always innocent enough. I mean—— Well, I can't quite explain her myself."

"And you'd rather not inform me of what has taken place?—the things that have happened to yourself and Miss Lee since I left you here in this office?"

"What do you expect me to tell?"

"As much or as little as you please. You have asked me to help you unravel a series of happenings—and I'm doing the best I can."

Julian smiled.

"You would ask me to unravel them for you, then, to be handed back again? All joking aside, Mr. Garrison, I have learned absolutely nothing new concerning the persons who sent Miss Lee to me, or why she was sent at all. I rather expected to get some news from you."

Garrison nodded.

"Which is reasonable enough. Frankly, however, my work in that direction is rather incomplete. At most I can state that from present indications your friend, Mr. Gardner, appears to have had intimate knowledge of what was about to occur, before your 'gift' arrived. Have there been any further developments in Miss Puryn's direction?—like demands for an explanation?"

"Abundant developments. But Miss Puryn is also your client. Has she proved as reluctant as myself to supply you with ammunition?"

A quizzical smile came faintly to Garrison's lips.

"Well—nearly. I'm afraid I'm not her only reliance."

"What do you mean?—She employs another detective—criminologist?"

"He may not be hers, although he shadows you."

Julian sat up.

"Some fellow that follows me? By George——"

Garrison interrupted, and took a quick glance at his watch.

"He isn't worth cursing, I assure you, and he delays important affairs. I think you ought to be informed that others besides myself are vastly interested to know the whereabouts of Miss Lee, whose connection with the ruby mystery has occurred to several minds. Their ideas may be hazy and theoretical, as yet, but at least they are rather warm."

Julian was silent for a moment.

"You speak as if there can be no doubt of her being involved in the case."

Garrison held his gaze with his penetrative glance.

"My doubts are no stronger than your own."

"Than mine?" demanded Julian. "Just exactly what does that mean?"

Garrison hesitated half a moment.

"You see it's my business to serve you, Mr. Vail, no matter where my duty may lead. I think you realize the importance of having me see Miss Lee. Also she is hard to trace, since no one in town, save yourself, Miss Puryn, and Mrs. Loomis, can even describe the young lady. I'm handicapped, you'll agree."

As he had a dozen times before, Julian hesitated on the verge of complete disclosures. He felt that Garrison was near the truth—too near to be deceived, and was perhaps too delicate to announce his discoveries in directions where sensitive spots might be encountered.

His glance fell upon the tall brass vase, and his color heightened. He had almost forgotten the ruby, the return of which was perplexing. If ever a man required assistance and counsel, he felt he was the one.

"I have always been sure of your loyal service," he said, "and I feel that your aid at this particular juncture—— Candidly, Garrison, you have been right all along. The ruby was left in my possession, the day Miss Lee arrived."

Garrison nodded quietly.

"How was it delivered?"

"In the heel of her shoe. Mind you, I am as positive now as I have ever been—in fact, a great deal more so—that she was absolutely ignorant of the facts, and innocent of any deliberate connection with the crime."

Not a sign of surprise was forthcoming from the man who made these crimes his science.

"How did you make your discovery? What did you do with the shoes?"

Julian rehearsed the story clearly and succinctly, withholding only such damaging facts as he could not explain or modify in their accusing aspect towards the girl.

"When I found the stone I thought perhaps it might be artificial," he concluded. "Miss Lee admitted that her father at times attempted to manufacture gems. Later I had my doubts, but I had hidden the stone rather peculiarly and was certain the fellows who entered and searched this office would never be able to trace it, when——"

Garrison interrupted.

"Wait! I built up a few deductions—a favorite hobby of mine—and informed you of one before. It was, you'll admit, quite accurate. I built another afterwards. Let us see how close to the truth my later logic lay. Just answer me this, Were you lured down country by a message that proved a forgery?"

"I was. I'll tell you all——"

"Were you then subjected to any sort of pressure to make you reveal the ruby's hiding-place?"

Julian stared at him blankly.

"You've seen Miss Lee? You've been informed?"

"Not a word. This is mere deduction, except—and this is a bit of confession for which I blush—I returned to this room that morning when the forged wire came, the moment you went out there with your clerk. I felt justified, in your own interests, in reading the message you had tossed upon the desk."

Julian continued to stare.

"And you framed up all that happened just from that?"

"Not at once, otherwise I might have been sufficiently close at hand to spare you some inconvenience."

The smile that came to Julian's face was not one of mirth; it was a tribute to Garrison's craft.

"Well," he said, "at least it remains for me to give you the sequel to the story. I 'phoned up here at the earliest possible moment, in an attempt to save the stone. It was gone—I mean the receptacle in which it was contained."

"Of course," said Garrison, coolly. "I carried it off myself."

Julian suddenly rose.

"You——"

"And sent it in this morning, undisturbed."

Vail sat down, resignedly, with a gesture of helplessness.

"You just now 'phoned for me to go up and see the Chief—a little blind?—But how on earth—— Why all this mystery?"

"You might not have chosen to surrender these facts, you see," said the criminologist. "I have waited till you should, endeavoring to appreciate your position and persuaded from the first of your faith in the young lady involved. I rented an office in this building purposely to meet your various requirements."

Vail was speechless with amazement for a moment, wondering just how far this expert's knowledge extended. Then a new solicitude drove all else from his mind.

"What in the world shall I do with the cursed stone?" he demanded. "What do you advise—

aside from turning it over to the Chief? I couldn't do that until——"

"Until you clear Miss Lee, or discover that she—— I understand."

"If you'll take it——" started Vail, but Garrison waved away the honor.

"Not yet, if you please. I counsel you to leave it where it is."

"After telling those scoundrels where to find it?"

"Exactly. They'd never believe you'd permit it to remain in your office now. Moreover, this place is guarded rather constantly, as they have already discovered."

There were two surprises in this, but Vail was at last expecting almost anything.

"They have tried it, then, and you, or someone, frightened them away?"

"One of my assistants betrayed himself through premature zeal, the night you were lured down country—or the hour was rather about one in the morning."

Vail got up and paced the floor.

"I hate to have the thing around here any longer—but—I suppose you are right, after all."

Garrison also arose.

"And now, if you can assist me to find Miss Lee——"

"I wish I could!" Julian interrupted. "I'd give almost anything I own to know where she is at this minute!"

"Perhaps I might help——" started Garrison, when the telephone bell cut in sharply.

Vail took up the instrument.

"It's for you," he said, a moment later, and Garrison responded to the wire.

He merely said, "Yes," and listened. Then presently, "Where?" he inquired and was once more silent. "I'll be there in less than ten minutes," was the last of his observations, and he moved with swift decision, snatching up his hat. "I'll see you at two this afternoon," he shot at Julian. "I've overstayed——"

A sharp knock came on the door, which Broughton opened to thrust in his head.

"Beg pardon," he said to his chief. "Miss Puryn, Mr. Vail."

Julian scowled.

"Thank you. Show her in."

Garrison had swung already to the private exit from the room and held it open.

"Leave the ruby where it is," he instructed. "I hope to bring some news this afternoon."

Then the second door was opened once again. Julian turned, beholding not Iris Puryn, but her sister Enid instead.

Garrison merely nodded, then was out in the hall, and gone.

CHAPTER XXVI

A SEARCH IN THE PARK

A VISIT from Iris Puryn would have occasioned no great surprise to a man in Vail's situation, but that of her sister did.

Enid was wonderfully gowned and colored both by nature and by art. Excitement burned in her face as well as in her eyes. She was evidently wrought to a very fine edge of tension by the daring of her venture. A great bunch of roses she wore at her breast fairly trembled with the beating of her heart.

"Oh, Julian! how good it is to see you back!" she immediately declared. "I didn't know whether I should find you in or not. I was merely passing by in the car and thought I'd run up to see if any news—— We didn't know what might have happened."

"You are very kind," said Julian, quietly. "May I ask you to accept a chair?"

"Oh, no, I couldn't stop but a minute," she replied. "I thought perhaps you ought to know of a little thing that happened just now, but perhaps it might disturb you at your work."

Vail was instinctively aware it was something she had purposely come to reveal. He toyed with a pencil on his desk.

"Oh, my work is fairly well in hand. It is something, of course, concerning Iris."

Enid looked her despair of the situation, and sank in the chair she had refused.

"It's too bad, the way she's behaving. I'm so sorry, dear Julian.—It isn't very much that has taken place, I suppose, after all."

He waited and she looked at him beseechingly, as one imploring forgiveness for things that others have done. "I had occasion to 'phone to Iris from a shop. She had just come in from a drive in the park—and was certain she saw your Miss Barbara Lee in a brougham with Sir Hugh Pearson. She thought it an extraordinary thing."

Vail could have leaped from his chair. He did not move, however, or betray the slightest emotion. His eyebrows were slightly raised.

"It's a very fine day for a drive—unusually fine."

If a shade of disappointment passed like a mist over Enid's face, it was promptly lost in a smile.

"It's horrid to be bold—even with one so near and dear as—as all our prospective relations," she said, "but I simply abominate driving alone—and the car's downstairs.—If your work *is* well in hand, why —perhaps——"

Julian forced a smile.

"I've neglected things here too long already, I'm afraid, but thank you very much for the thoughtfulness, nevertheless."

Enid retrieved her vanishing smile with skill.

"I thought—I hoped—— It's so much more interesting when one can see *everyone* who's out."

Julian was wild for her to go. He nodded.

"Very interesting."

There was nothing more for Enid either to impart or suggest. Her embarrassment increased. Then her glance encountered the dry and faded flowers in his vase.

"Oh, you've been neglected!" she declared. "Such flowers, my dear Julian! Let me leave you mine instead!" She arose and began at once to unfasten the roses secured upon her gown.

"No, no! Oh, no!" protested Vail, with sudden apprehension. "I'd much rather not have those disturbed, for many reasons. I couldn't permit you to rob yourself. Besides, I——"

Broughton interrupted, at the door, where he knocked and entered, delivering a card. Vail received it and read it at a glance:

"Hobart Clarkson,
New York Evening Star."

He sat down instantly and wrote on a pad, "Back in fifteen minutes." On a second sheet he scribbled, "Broughton—tell him you found this note on the desk, and ask him to wait." He handed both sheets to his confidential man, who nodded and disappeared.

Enid's discomfort continued to grow apace.

"If it's anyone to see you, Julian," she said, "I'd

be sorry to make myself a nuisance. I suppose I shouldn't have come,—but—oh, dear! it *is* such a day for a drive!"

Julian glanced at his watch.

"It's a business appointment. The man is just on the dot. Won't you take your chair again?"

He feared that she would, as she oscillated there in indecision. But she presently bade him a lingering adieu and departed the private way.

He instantly swooped on the telephone, rang up his garage, and ordered his car for immediate use. Then only pausing to assure himself that Enid was out of the building, he escaped to the street with astonishing celerity, beckoned a loitering taxicab to the curb, and was soon swiftly driven up crowded Broadway on his way for a tour of the Park.

His car was out on the greasy floor when he came to the "cave" where these modern minotaurs were lodged. Then, at the risk of meeting Enid on the way, he drove furiously over to Fifth Avenue, there to join the parade of wealth moving ceaselessly up and down.

Thousands of cars and carriages were flowing past and with him, an endless chain of life and animation. The sunlight gleamed from countless surfaces of silver, varnish, and glass. It was just before the summer exodus from town—the gilded hour of Gotham's enjoyment of her innumerable rich, so soon to flit abroad and to shore and mountains on the butterfly wings of caprice. It was brilliant beyond conception—and costly beyond compare.

But, save for the quick, searching glances that he shot through all the press, Vail paid the slightest tribute of attention to anything in view. He was wild with impatience, thus to be bottled up, as it were, by the streaming wealth about him. Rapidity of locomotion was, however, impossible.

Past the great hotels, the huge, unfinished library and the twin-spired cathedral of St. Patrick he tooled his car with never a thought for anything save the girl whose throne was in his heart. That the throne seemed particularly empty and neglected, since Enid had come with her tale, was not particularly strange. But what he could do, should he finally encounter Sir Hugh and Barbara, was more than he halted to reflect.

He had scarcely taken time to consider all the worries aroused by Garrison's latest revelations, but they eddied and swirled like a deep-moving stream in his fretted subconsciousness.

At length, after passing the famous homes of the New York millionaires erected below the Park, he wedged his car through the pouring floods of vehicles at the Plaza and entered the soothing oasis of grass and lakes and trees.

It seemed as if, as Enid had said, the world was driving in the Park. Scores of society's paragons and protégés went trooping by, in their chariots of power. By the dozen they nodded at Julian, and wondered at his stiff response and the set, eager look of his face.

He traversed the length of the fashionable drive

before he began to realize how hopeless was his quest. In all this bewildering pageantry, how could he hope to achieve the ends for which he was illogically striving? And yet, as if in answer to his query, as he turned to go southward with the flow, he was passed by Iris Puryn, driving there with Gardner.

He saw them plainly in Gardner's barouche, with his famous ebony mares. Then they were gone on their way. They had missed him completely, having failed to cast a glance in his direction.

He was glad they were here together; then he forgot them for thoughts that went deeper in his soul. He merely drove on in the gilded paths of pleasure, searching its units as before.

The park was a shimmering basin of sunlight, greenery, and life. Equestrians went posting by on shaded bridle-paths; afar were hordes of children, filling the air with joyful notes. Long miles of benches on either hand were packed with sun-loving people, watching where wealth and self-indulgence went languorously by.

For perhaps an hour Vail continued his rounds, in vain. When at length whole caravans of cars and carriages had departed, giving way to fresher equipments, he awoke to the fact that Barbara had doubtless long since returned to the home where Sir Hugh Pearson had found her. It occurred to his mind to appeal to Sir Hugh himself. The nobleman was obviously acquainted with Barbara's whereabouts, and would doubtless supply the address, or the name of

the "Lady" Someone with whom she had doubtless gone.

Watching alertly for a chance to get ahead, Julian cast a glance to the left—and suddenly discovered Barbara, being driven leisurely past, in the opposite direction.

Sir Hugh and a woman whose face was turned away were likewise in the carriage, a black Victoria with a pair of splendid bays.

It could last but a moment, the fleeting scrutiny that Julian bent on the face of the girl. He saw she was richly but simply gowned; he saw that pleasure bloomed in her cheeks and the sunlight was mirrored in her eyes. Then, as the current bore her away, she seemed to catch at some invisible warning in the air and turned to meet Julian's gaze.

He saw her whiten, saw the parting of her lips, as if she would cry out his name—then a hansom intervened.

He could not turn to follow. He was hemmed in as completely as a paving-block set among its fellows. He could only continue straight ahead, jockeying impatiently right and left, to escape to a crossroad and turn.

It seemed as if there were no roads by which to evade the crush. He emerged at last upon another drive, however, and recklessly shot down the park to reach the Plaza entrance.

A hundred trifling incidents delayed him everywhere. Yet he came at last to the exit sought, and, detecting a black Victoria with bays, just ahead,

made shift to urge his car in its path till a side street below received it from the traffic.

There he beheld it halt before a door. Two ladies alighted, too far away for their faces to be seen. The carriage turned, and came rapidly back to meet him, a gentleman remaining on its cushions. Half a minute later it passed—but the man was not Sir Hugh.

Julian rolled by aimlessly, aware that his chase had failed.

CHAPTER XXVII

A CUP OF TEA

IT was nearly four in the afternoon when at length, by dint of pursuing that English gentleman all over the city by 'phone, Julian finally captured Sir Hugh Pearson and obtained the information by which Barbara might be sought.

Aware that the name Miss Lee would avail him nothing, Vail inquired for Lady Constance Drew, to whom he said he owed a social obligation he much desired to cancel. He had stupidly lost the house address, he alleged, and could think of no means likelier than this for retrieving his neglect.

With the utmost courtesy possible the Baron supplied the intelligence that her "ladyship" was stopping with Lady Honore Kent, whose home address, just off the Avenue, Vail knew he should never forget.

Indeed, he took no time to incur the risk. Not without his doubts of obtaining admission to the premises, he was nevertheless at the door at five o'clock, where his cards for Lady Constance Drew and her titled hostess were gravely received by the servant in attendance.

Julian was ushered into a room of rich appoint-

ments and waited there alone. The madness of the adventure began at length to percolate into his mind. Lady Honore Kent must of course be aware of the fact that Barbara had been forcibly abducted from his care, if she was not in fact the woman of the veil. He could make no demands upon her, require no explanations, offer no valid excuses for appearing here uninvited.

He was wholly undecided as to any plan of action, but he had not long to wait. His hostess came quietly into the room and disarmed him with a smile. Medium tall, and decidedly English, Lady Kent was a person with every indication of breeding and refinement in her mien.

"Mr. Vail?" she said, extending her hand with the utmost graciousness. "I trust you will pardon me for coming down a moment ahead of Lady Constance. She has been for a ride in the Park with her fiancé, and has only just dressed for tea. I hope you're not so hopelessly American as to refuse a cup of tea?"

"Great pleasure, I'm sure," said Julian, rather lamely. "The Park is a great temptation such a glorious afternoon."

His hostess agreed that it was.

He was certain Lady Honore was not aware he had passed them in the Park. Her mention, therefore, of Barbara's fiancé had the doom-like ring of truth. Moreover, in thus opposing no objection to his meeting her protégée, Lady Honore gave him another surprise that left him somewhat confused.

His mind had been prepared for another sort of greeting. He floundered mentally in all directions to resume his wonted poise. He wondered swiftly what Barbara would do to support or confute her hostess. Even the way she might enter the room would be significant.

"I—met Lady Constance at the ball—the Comity Ball," he explained, incapable of introducing the subject of Barbara's abduction from his car as a matter perilous to mention without doing possible harm. "It must have been some oversight that I was not presented to you."

Lady Honore smiled.

"Won't you come to our cozier quarters? Tea and comfort suggest one another, do they not?"

She led the way to the farther room, and Julian followed meekly, his forces unmarshaled, his wits awry, his purposes scattered to the winds. He felt himself an intruder who was nevertheless made welcome in the finest conception of the term.

This apartment, like the drawing-room proper, was tastefully and richly furnished. It appeared to be a lounging and reading room, with a tabourette for tea. A number of novels and magazines were lying carelessly about.

Her ladyship rang for the tea at once and began to chat of plays. She was doing her utmost, apparently, to entertain her guest. Had she comprehended the exceptional embarrassment under which the man was laboring, she could scarcely have been more soothing and assuring to Julian's nerves.

The servant arrived with his silver tray—and then came Barbara.

She entered the room in a manner so composed that Vail almost thought he was dreaming. The dainty, exquisite gown she wore seemed the final touch to complete her as a princess. She had never appeared more beautiful, and never so quiet and contained.

Julian rose to greet her. She came across the floor with girlish grace, and held out her hand as the merest matter of form.

"How do you do, Mr. Vail?" she said. "How good of you to come."

It was just a bare touch of hands that they exchanged.

"I—I had hoped to call before," Vail stammered, at a loss for anything to say. Then, as Barbara sank upon a chair, he once more resumed his seat.

"My dear, I shall perish of thirst," said Lady Honore, languidly. "Do pour us some tea at once." She turned as before to Vail.

"You were just about to tell me what you think of Stover's play."

Julian made an effort and succeeded in finding himself.

"It seems to have a rather good idea. He ought to have it dramatized."

Lady Honore laughed in honest delight.

"Oh, I hope I may steal that to tell to—someone else. Lady Constance, I shall repeat it to your fiancé."

Instantly Julian glanced at Barbara's face. She

was crimson with consciousness of his gaze, and kept her eyes upon the cups she was daintily filling with tea.

She was barely able to murmur:

"Cream or lemon, Mr. Vail?"

"Lemon," said Julian, "—both—I mean—neither —just sugar, if you please."

"What a perfectly lazy day!" continued Lady Honore, irrelevantly. "I'm sure I never in all my life breathed such soporific air."

Despite the fact he felt he was observed, Julian glanced at her ladyship a second only, then back at Barbara, who offered a cup of amber brew without once lifting her glance.

She made no effort whatsoever at joining in the conversation. Indeed, it became a monologue, Lady Honore talking with easy fluency, on one topic after another.

Vail drank his tea, with no idea of its flavor. It seemed a trifle oversweet; of this he was dimly aware. Barbara likewise sought refuge in her cup. The constraint of the situation grew.

In a purely mechanical manner Julian smiled, or uttered some monosyllable, to appear even barely alive. He had never felt so utterly discomfited, or helpless. There was nothing of the slightest private nature he could say to Barbara, not an object of his visit to attain. And a strange dulling sense of indifference was creeping on his brain.

"Oh, my dear," said the hostess to Barbara, sweetly, "we'd both quite forgotten the note you

were to write, and I'm sure I left the necklace on the dresser. I wonder if you'd mind just running up before the servants find it lying carelessly about?"

"Not in the least," said Barbara, putting down her cup with ready alacrity and rising to leave the room. "Shall I bring it to you here?"

"It might be better in the safe," her ladyship responded, and, turning to Vail as Barbara disappeared, she smilingly added, "One's jewels are so often one's worries."

Through some weaving mist that he strove to banish from his brain Vail groped for a species of test.

"Both worries and responsibilities," he agreed. "Think of having in one's possession some priceless gem like the great Hope diamond, or the famous Gatama ruby."

Not a sign did the lady's face betray.

"Dear me! Haven't I read something recently about that particular stone?"

Vail could feel no sense of her guilt, yet he attempted another reply that some way seemed to drain his very powers of concentration.

"Quite likely. It was recently stolen, its owner having been murdered for the purpose."

The shot glanced from her ladyship like water from a furnace.

"What a pity!" she said. "I should never forgive my carelessness if anything should have happened to my poor little handful of gems! Would you pardon my absence for a moment?"

Her solicitude for the necklace had every appear-

ance of being genuine as she rose and placed her cup upon a stand.

Julian got upon his feet like a man of lead, the movement requiring deliberate effort.

"By all means," he managed to say, and the words seemed to echo through his skull with a hollow, foreign sound. And then, through a dizzying whirl of things invisible, he beheld her disappear.

For a moment he swayed there drunkenly, incapable of collecting his thoughts sufficiently to wonder what it meant. Instinct more than ordered reason warned him in some distant manner of unreality that something must be wrong.

He staggered across to the window, moving through a maelstrom, as it were, of rapidly revolving images, all of them black, and without real substance or form. The window was already open, but the air merely cleared no webs from his brain. As if in a mighty conflict between things rational and utterly absurd, he realized, vaguely but protestingly, that the tea he had taken was drugged.

Some mastering resolution to break the spell, crash down the door, and either escape to shout for help or punish the woman who had done this thing, swam giddily in and out of his senses.

He plunged like a stone man towards the door, knocking the chairs from his path. He reached it, to find it was locked. Obeying blind-animal impulse, he lurched to the other—and there was baffled again.

He felt he was dying for air. He could barely see. He had lost all control of his legs, and, with

bending knees and drooping spine, went reeling once more towards the window. He reached it in a series of plunges and caught at the sill for support.

At a sound he turned. Inside the door stood a figure simply gowned. He was certain it was Barbara, though Inferno danced blackly between. By a mighty struggle he compelled the power of speech.

"Barbara! Barbara!" he cried, in a thickened utterance that rang with confusion in his ears. "I'm poisoned! What, in God's name—have you done?"

A mocking laugh was the only reply vouchsafed his departing consciousness; then he sank on the floor in a heap.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A DREAD AWAKENING

SIX hundred feet high, above the green of little Madison Square, the mighty bell in the Metropolitan tower boomed out five deep, reverberating notes that it seemed to Vail were sounded from the hollow of his skull.

Pains dull and acute, pains crawling and swift as a poignard, assailed him from finger-tips to brain.

He was dimly aware that light stole grayly to his eyes before he could lift their lids. Disjointed memories, fragments of dreams, and readjusting mental processes jostled their way to his mind.

When at length he sat up, with eyes widely staring, he felt he might collapse. Nevertheless, his strength came home like a rough, impatient tenant too eager for orderly ways.

He was sore of head; he was dazed; his limbs were stiff. Unaware of the time, despite the half-remembered bell, he took out his watch, to find it was stopped, then sat there to press both his temples. His hat lay near, on the floor.

Perhaps because the light increased he judged it was early morning. Jarring reminders of what had occurred assembled like bits of mosaic in his mind, to arouse him to painful indignation. He rubbed at his

eyes and looked about, confused by the aspect of the place.

It was not the room in which, as he remembered, he had found himself drugged by the tea. The fact was obvious; nevertheless, to his groping wits nothing seemed absolutely certain. He could not yet have told to save his life that the room was not the same.

Weak and uncertain, he finally dragged himself to his feet and attempted to puzzle it out. First the size of the apartment, and then the furnishings, convinced him he had been moved. This room was small, old, dingy, supplied with rickety chairs and stands that were dusty with neglect. Its one unclean window looked out upon bare brick walls.

His youth and robust constitution asserted themselves by leaps and bounds to clarify his functions. His clothing was dusty and disheveled. He gave it the merest glance and moved across to the door that led from the room.

The door, as at the other house, was locked. He began to realize that, having first been rendered helpless through some powerful narcotic in the tea that Barbara had poured, he had later been hustled from the premises, thrown in this wretched hovel, and secured there like a beast in a kennel.

His indignation grew to wrath of an all-embracing scope. The door that opposed him filled his being with resentment. He charged it like a strong young bull, heaving the weight of his solid shoulder against the panels till it creaked.

At the second attack the wood gave way, breaking from the lock. An echo rolled through the dusty hall that he found himself confronting, then stillness settled as before.

Indeed, the quiet and the filtered light, that stole through curtained windows, began to impress him with a sense that the place was quite deserted. Two flights of stairs—one leading upward to a floor above, the other leading downward to a darkened hall below—convinced him he was stationed at the second story of the house.

He paused to listen, by way of precaution, for any sounds of life that might have resulted from the crashing disturbance of the door. There were none. Quietly proceeding along the hall, to a door that stood slightly ajar, he halted, caught no sound from within and gently pushed it open.

The room was empty, save for a few odd bits of furniture, and a rolled-up carpet on the floor. It was feebly lighted through slits in the blinds that masked its street-fronting windows.

Deciding he was quite alone in the building, and beginning to wonder where it was and why he had thus been "dumped" like old rubbish in the place, he returned to the head of the stairs, but paused before descending.

His anger continued to grow. It crowded out all immediate possibility of reflection on the case. Barbara, Lady Honore, and all the tangle gone before were mixed in a heterogeneous confusion in his mind.

What he should do hereafter was left for calmer

speculation. The first things to know were—where he was, what day had dawned, and what hour was passing in the world. The first thing to do was to leave this house and set about achieving the punishment of those behind the game.

The hallway below was dim with gloom, where everything was closed. Suspicious of yet more lurking treacheries, Julian noiselessly descended, his hand on the dusty banister of the stairs, his senses attuned for the slightest sound or movement. He fancied he smelled the stuffy odor of kerosene and beheld some object down at the foot of the steps.

He presently halted, staring at the still thing below on the floor. He was certain the form was that of a man, perhaps asleep in the path he must take before he could reach the door.

Determined to slay the fellow, if need be with his naked hands, should resistance to his departure be attempted, Vail continued downward silently, till the stairs abruptly groaned.

The sound was fearfully magnified by the emptiness of the hall. It seemed to Julian sufficiently loud to arouse all the sleepers in the block. But the form below made not a sign, and he presently crept towards it as before.

Again the ancient stairway snapped with his weight upon its planks. Again he stopped, now ready to dash upon this sleeping guardian and hurl him from his path—but nothing happened.

More boldly he took the few remaining steps, intently regarding the human form, no longer half-

imagined, who lay between him and the door. There was not the slightest movement in the figure on the floor. The sleeper's face was turned the other way.

Still possessed by the thought that here was some ruffian left in charge of himself, Julian stepped cautiously around the silent form and made his way to the door. Even in passing he could not see the shadow-hidden face on the carpet.

To his thorough surprise the vestibule door was unfastened. It yielded readily when he turned the knob, and a band of filmy daylight streamed in at once from the glass-surrounded barrier beyond.

Vail was still watching the silent form. A certain dread engulfed him with that entrance of the light.

The man on the floor was dead.

The pallor, the pose, and the aspect were not to be mistaken. Vail leaned back against the frame of the door, in awe. He could see one marbleized hand lying palm upward, stiff and cold.

And it had no thumb!

This fact went home to Julian strangely, as a realizing sense that the man before him was the fellow of Hackett Tides took concrete form in his mind.

Despite the fact he had failed to see the face of the spokesman at the island inquisition, there was not the slightest room for doubt that this was the very man.

But, aside from the train of baffled speculation that this discovery inaugurated, loomed the far more

alarming aspect of the situation in which he found himself.

If he fled the premises forthwith, and were seen, a dusty, disheveled figure, escaping from an empty house where a murdered man was lying, what explanation could he offer? Yet he could not remain. Not only was the thought intolerable, but should anyone come and find him here, alone with that figure on the floor, his plight would be even worse.

He partially closed the door again and stood there fixedly staring. Perhaps the man was not murdered, after all. He tiptoed back for a closer examination —and again felt a shock at his vitals.

The man had been strangled. The only bruise upon him was a small, X-shaped wound on his forehead. His bull's-eye lantern lay near at hand, its oil spilled out on the floor. It was just such a murder as that of the Maharajah, from whom the ruby had been stolen.

Cold sweat had oozed from Julian's brow, as he once more retreated, chilled by indecision and the fear to go or stay. For a moment he wondered if the whole affair had not been planned to throw suspicion on himself. Then another suggestion came to his mind, the merest vague theory that he had been intended for a victim—that, having been rendered unconscious and helpless, he was simply delivered here at this empty dwelling for this dead man to prison again.

The set of scoundrels who had tortured him down at the island had failed of their object, after all.

Since this was the spokesman of the outfit, overtaken by violent fate, it was not at all improbable he had come here through some deliberate plan to recoup their previous failure, through a drugged man, locked in the house.

And once again the trick had been turned through Barbara's assistance. There was no denying the plain, accusing fact that she had given him the tea. At a dim recollection of her coming later to the room, to laugh in derision at his plight, Vail could have groaned for the anguish that gripped to the core of his heart.

But the time was ill suited for dwelling long on thoughts of what had been. He was far too confused and far too concerned with this latest development to speculate on mysteries too deep for his clarifying powers. He would simply have to make his escape, and possibly warn the police.

Once more he crept to the entrance, feeling guilty of deserting the dead. His heart was pounding wildly, in alarm lest he might be seen. Hardly less furtively than a thief, he closed himself into the vestibule, and opened the outside door, perhaps an inch.

With a clatter of its horses' hoofs on the pavement a milk wagon rattled up the street. Vail closed the door instantly and suppressed the sound of his breathing. It seemed a time interminable before the wagon was gone.

He tried again.

This time the shock that came was greater. A

lone policeman, on the opposite walk, was strolling leisurely by, apparently watching the place. To call him seemed a madness he must certainly avoid. Vail shrank behind the door.

He made an attempt to dust off his clothing, but the noise seemed frightfully loud. At length he dared to peer from the crack again. The officer was gone, but the purr of an early automobile came distinctly up the street.

A moment later it halted, just below. Instinctively Vail felt this house was the object of those who had just arrived. His fear was confirmed when someone came briskly across the walk and was heard to stop at the steps. He closed the door without a sound, retreated once more inside the hall, and halted helplessly.

Someone was fumbling at the outside barrier, and spoke in a muffled voice. Unable to endure his position longer, Julian fled to the back of the stairs, where a closet led down to the cellar. Immediately taking advantage of the blackness of this retreat, and leaving its door ajar, he heard two men enter at the threshold and utter a note of dread.

The daylight had streamed in behind them, casting their shadows up the hall. Then one of them spoke, and Julian's heart stood still.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE SIGN OF BUDDHA

IT was Garrison's voice that echoed in the place.

"Good Heavens!" he said. "Nick Lawbit!—He must have been dead for hours! Choked like the Maharajah! . . . Ah!"—he had found the mark like a bruise upon the forehead—"that X again between the eyes! . . . Listen! What was that?"

The door that Julian held had slightly moved and creaked.

He heard a click where Garrison cocked his gun.

"Come out!" said the criminologist. "Come out, there, friend, hands up!"

Vail had suppressed an impulse to make his appearance at once. Not without a sense of relief and almost with a sense of humor in the situation, he stepped from the darkness to the light.

"For the love of——" started Garrison. "Vail! Good Lord, man, what are you doing here?"

Julian came toward him, shrugging his shoulders.

"I don't know, Garrison," he said. "I woke up here, not fifteen minutes ago. I was locked in a room upstairs."

The man with the criminologist, John Nettleton by name—a faithful being, frequently of great assist-

ance to his chief—had supplied the tip that landed Garrison here, at this scene of crime. His astonishment at Vail's appearance made him temporarily dumb. He held a useless weapon in his hand and stared with his mouth wide open.

"Here, Nettleton, shut that outside door!" commanded Garrison, sharply. "Upon my word, Mr. Vail, I don't understand—— Have you spent all night in this house?"

Again Vail replied, "I don't know." He added in a lowered tone of voice, that Nettleton need not hear: "I can tell you about it later. I was drugged and brought here unconscious. I broke from a room on the upper floor and soon discovered this. Is the dead man anyone you know?"

"Know him?" answered Garrison, whose mind was cleaving into all the business like an engine-driven saw. "He's a well-known crook, but—— Look here, Mr. Vail, think sharp—have you ever seen the man before? Do you possibly recognize the fellow as one of the men you met at Hackett Tides?"

"I do," said Vail, "by his thumb. He's the one who did the talking and appeared to be the boss."

"So!" said the criminologist, slapping his thigh, then rapping himself on the forehead. "I'll get it! —I'll get it yet. He must have known you were here. He came to get you and put on the screws—make good the former failure—get the stone—— But what's behind it all?" He paced up and down the resounding hall, so acutely engrossed with deductions that more pressing duties were neglected.

"Here," he added, abruptly to his man, "Nettleton, see what he's got in his pockets!"

He resumed his walk and struck himself harder on the head.

"What's the use, Mr. Vail?" he presently demanded. "You only give me half a chance. But never mind—that comes later!" He halted at Nettleton's side. "Let me look at that again!" His sharp, clear gaze was fixed for a time on the X in the colorless flesh.

He touched it with his thumb. "Cut, no doubt about it!" He shot up suddenly and struck his fist in his palm.

"I've got it—clear as day! The sign of the sitting Buddha!"

Vail was more puzzled than before. He was not at all certain that Garrison was sane.

"If you've got it," he said, "for God's sake tell me, Garrison, that it's something that clears me of suspicion."

Garrison stared.

"Clears you of what suspicion? You don't believe I'm such an ass as to lay this murder at your door?"

Julian all but summoned a smile.

"But I see how it might appear to anyone finding me here, alone with the corpse."

"What's that?" said Garrison, dismissing this phase of the business instantly and turning once more to his man, "—that card there. Never mind the jimmy or the gun."

From a miscellaneous heap of junk extracted from the pockets of the man on the floor the card was promptly extracted, and Garrison held it to the light. Upon it was printed:

"MADAME STARLIGHT——"

with an address fairly in the borders of the tenderloin district of the town. Scrawled above the name, in pencil, was the number of this particular house and the street wherein it stood.

Garrison deliberately slipped it in his pocket. One hurried glance was all he deemed the other discoveries worth.

"Put it all back where you found it," he instructed, briefly. "It's time to call the police. Mr. Vail, Nettleton, this case is mine, and this card you will kindly forget." He turned about to Julian, adding, "You might take my car and go home."

Julian pulled out his watch and wound at the stem. He inquired, "What is the time?"

"Five-forty-three A.M."

"What day?"

"Sunday. I'll call at your apartments, perhaps by twelve o'clock."

"What will you do—what will you say to the officers about finding me here in the house?"

"Nothing—at least till the case becomes foolproof. Get out a little carefully, that's all. I'll send for the car later on."

Unspeakably relieved to think of escaping from

the place, Vail peered from the door, as he had before, and found the street deserted. He was presently guiding the borrowed car across to deserted Fifth Avenue, and finally, with the dust of his night quarters still upon him, was once more alone in his apartments.

Despite his sensations of weariness and pain, occasioned by the drugging and his subsequent treatment, Vail was remarkably refreshed and restored by his bath and the process of dressing for breakfast. His recovery was completed by the hearty meal he devoured at seven o'clock. Then he wondered what he should do.

He had carefully scrutinized every phase and aspect of the business at Lady Kent's—and was wholly at sea. It appeared absurd that Barbara Lee should be once more acquitted of deliberate participation in all the outrageous occurrences of which he had been the victim, yet so tenacious is love and so stubborn the bias of the human mind that he could not convict her, even now.

Admitting there seemed no ground on which to excuse this latest treachery, he nevertheless retained some poor, illogical little hope that, somehow, something might transpire to restore the confidence she had always reinspired. To believe she had willfully contributed to all that had happened since he took the cup of tea was to charge her with infamies too black for a girlish heart to harbor for an hour.

A hundred mad hypotheses were formed, in his despair of explaining things away. Yet, with all his

eagerness to find her guiltless, he constantly returned to a contemplation of things that the night had developed, and what might have been, that some deadly hand had averted.

He felt the thing would presently sap his mind, were nothing done to rid him of its bane. Like the man who has failed in the Wall Street game and agrees to quit if only his losses can be recouped, he told himself he would gladly surrender Barbara if only he could once get at the reasons of her actions and know she loved him not at all. But that was the rub.—He had felt her response to his own vast love—and his heart had become her slave.

There was no decision he could reach, no satisfied state he could attain. He paced the floor feverishly, already wondering where she was, and how two women could have dared the thing that was done at Lady Kent's. He was sure some man was behind it all, as he always had been before.

The red-headed man was hauntingly present in his mind. The whole thing wore on his nerves. What should he look for next?—and how employ the day? Should he seek Sir Hugh Pearson, either to warn him or be warned? Should he go again to the house the women occupied and probe in the matter for himself? He felt sure they would not be there.

Eight o'clock came and nine, and still he paced. He was unaware of the flight of time, as he lived again, persistently, even happily, that day at the island with the boat that he and Barbara repaired, working side by side in their Eden.

Subconsciously he waited with one ear bent to the telephone. Some lover's hope that Barbara would call him up and explain, or at least desire him to come to her side, would not be banished from his breast.

But ten o'clock winged silently by with no results. It was nearly eleven, with Julian rapidly finding the walls of his quarters intolerable, when the instrument actually rang.

CHAPTER XXX

TWO SIGNIFICANT INTERVIEWS

IT was Iris Puryn on the wire.

In her calm, even tones she bade him a formal good-morning and then conveyed, in a message that was half-request and half-command, her desire to see him forthwith.

There was no attempt to discuss their affairs across the instrument. Vail replied that he was momentarily expecting a man to keep an appointment. Iris was impatient. He looked at his watch, for the fiftieth time that morning. He had more than an hour till noon.

"All right," he agreed. "I'll start at once."

He was leaving the room when the telephone bell called again, with Garrison's hasty summons.

"Can't get there, after all," he said. "Off out of town for a certain light from the stars. May not be back till to-morrow. Expect to have something to report. Good-by!"

"Wait! Wait!" cried Julian, but the instrument gave him no response.

Twenty minutes later he once more entered the sumptuous apartment in which he and Iris had exchanged information concerning Miss Barbara Lee.

The air of disdain Miss Puryn assumed began to be an irritation before they had taken their seats. She was beautiful this morning, in her cold and placid manner, but displeasure marred her expression. She began with commendable promptness to introduce the all-important subject.

"I presume you received my last letter?"

Julian nodded.

"If you mean your ultimatum, I think I may say I did."

Her glance was one of challenge.

"You have made no reply."

"What did you expect?" he answered. "You demanded explanations, no more pertinent than many with which I might retaliate if such a procedure were either wise or kind."

She flushed slightly.

"Do you think that a fair evasion? If you refuse to answer my questions, we may as well know it at once."

Julian looked at her steadily.

"I have nothing to evade. I have done nothing I wish to dodge. If your letter remains unanswered, it is because I've had nothing to say."

"No reply to all that story in the *Star?*"

"Do you place such unlimited credence in a New York yellow journal?"

"I do not," she answered, incisively, a new light of triumph in her eyes. "I happen to *know* that you were out of town for more than twenty-four hours, on a mission I have a right to doubt. The *Star's*

account confirmed the facts that were not mere yellow journalism, or I should not have written as I did."

Julian nodded as before.

"I'm aware your hired detective was busy keeping track of my movements."

She was not in the least perturbed.

"And what have your movements been? Is it going too far to call them attentions to a certain doubtful young person?"

"Is that what you got me here to say?"

"Not precisely, but your attitude provokes it."

"I told you frankly, at the first, I had no intention of sending a friendless young girl adrift in New York, after what had occurred at my office. Had you stayed—had you offered a little assistance—the merest human——"

Iris interrupted.

"If you please, I consider that part of the topic closed. We are interested now in what has happened since. Are you willing to recount all that with equal frankness?"

"If you mean am I willing to be forced into explanations and the like, I fear I must answer I am not."

"You refuse to confess what has happened recently with regard to this young person?"

"I believe my attitude amounts to that, since you insist upon putting some ugly construction on a strictly private affair."

Her eyes were glittering coldly.

"You say that deliberately, aware as you must be that all I said in my letter I most certainly meant?"

"You have left me very little choice."

She bit her lip with annoyance. The engagement was already broken so far as she was concerned, and already her new alliance, with Gardner, was complete. Yet it piqued her now, to find that Vail accepted with calm a decision she intended to be crushing.

"It is not what I have offered," she said. "You have chosen for yourself.—It is useless, I imagine, to warn you how greatly you have been deceived."

That shot, at least, went home.

"In whom?—all womankind?"

It was a counter, and had its effect. Quite well aware that in secretly engaging herself to Gardner she had practiced the meanest of deceptions, she resorted to a feminine defense.

"It was singular Miss Lee should have taken the pains to insist upon her friendless position, here in New York, then be seen with gentlemen, driving in the Park."

"Yes," retorted Julian, quietly, "Sir Hugh is very much of a gentleman. I knew you saw them there while driving about with Gardner."

Iris flushed to her ears.

"That is absolutely false!"

Julian shrugged his shoulders. He wondered how far she would go in support of her statement.

"You deny that you were driving in the Park with Gardner, yesterday afternoon?"

She put on her haughtiest air.

"I have no intention of submitting to a catechism."

"Quite right," said Vail, judicially. "It is not at all a dignified procedure for either party to a case like ours to be so humiliated."

She felt herself suddenly disarmed. Her only recourse was her letter.

"Then you understand, with nothing further said, that our former relationship is canceled?"

"Perfectly. I trust we may still be friends."

She was beaten at every point. She could scarcely have told whether she was now the rejector or rejected. He held out his hand, and, though she felt that even in this he was the victor, she could do no less than give him her own and so seal the parting of their ways.

If for just the flash of a moment she felt some regret—some sense of a possible error of judgment—she instantly snatched at the satisfying assurance that Gardner would presently belittle this man with such a defeat of his railroad projects as to leave him practically ruined.

"I'm sorry not to ask you to dinner," she said, with a smile. "But your movements have been so uncertain."

"So have my dinners," he answered, cheerfully. "—Good-by."

He quitted the house with a sense of relief that was fairly soothing to his nerves. With a feeling of being strangely aimless and bereft of a definite ob-

ject for the day, he was driven once more to his bachelor apartments, where a visitor, sitting in the onyx corridor, was awaiting his return.

It was Sir Hugh Pearson, of the secret service of Great Britain. He arose with alacrity at Julian's entrance, obviously glad of the meeting.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Mr. Vail, I'm enormously relieved to see you. May I ask for a moment of private conversation?"

"An hour!" said Julian, with both welcome and fear of what might be coming. "The afternoon, if you like. Come up to my section of the shack."

They ascended at once to his floor.

He offered cigars and the easiest chair that his sumptuous quarters afforded, when he and his guest were alone, but the Baronet waved both away.

"The hardest seat and no weed, when one's time is limited," he said, with a glance at his watch. "If you'll pardon my coming abruptly to the point, Mr. Vail, I'd like to inquire if you happen to know where our mutual friends have retreated?"

Vail was receiving news.

"Lady Kent and Lady Constance Drew? Do you mean they have gone from their home since yesterday afternoon?"

"Apparently. I could get no reply on the telephone and my man could deliver nothing—get no response—at the door."

Having wondered if something of this nature might not develop, Vail was not surprised.

"They may have gone to the country for the

day," he suggested. "The servants might have taken advantage of their absence to lock up until they return."

"You were there, I take it, yesterday afternoon?"

"Long enough to drink a cup of tea."

"They said nothing then of a change of plans that would take them out of town?"

"Not a word."

Sir Hugh was silent, musing on the matter for a moment.

"Rather singular, after specially inviting——" He stroked his blond mustache unconsciously. "Mr. Vail," he added, irrelevantly, "we've known one another rather well, take it here and over in London."

"Thank you, Sir Hugh," said Vail, "I hope so. Otherwise I shouldn't have asked that favor yesterday. If there's anything I can do to reciprocate, pray afford me the earliest possible opportunity."

"Thanks, old chap, I will—I may be quite frank, I trust."

"I shall be flattered if you will."

"May I venture to ask your opinion of Lady Kent?"

Julian met his gaze with a level glance.

"I wish I had one worthy of consideration. I have met her but once. Her manners were perfectly gracious—which is just about all I know."

"Perhaps you are better acquainted with Lady Constance?"

The slightest tinge of color played on Julian's face.

"I find her no less puzzling than others of her sex."

"But you do find her puzzling?"

"Why, yes—I confess I do."

"In what respect?"

Vail leaped at the opening afforded to test a matter for himself. He appeared to think, but the pause was deliberately planned.

"Perhaps most of all in respect of her engagement to be married. I learned of it first from Lady Kent."

Sir Hugh was subtly alert.

"Oh! Lady Kent has announced—some engagement?"

"Well, not exactly. She merely made the statement that Lady Constance had been riding all afternoon with her fiancé."

Sir Hugh pulled hard at his mustache.

"That was false!" he declared. "I mean to say it couldn't possibly be true."

A wild, unreasoning joy leaped to Julian's heart, despite all the things gone before. He retained a mask of calm.

"It might have been some mistake."

"It *was* a mistake—but I'm glad to know that it was told you, nevertheless." Sir Hugh grew calmer again. "May I ask you, Mr. Vail, if any Hindoos were there—at Lady Kent's—while you were present?"

"There was no one there save myself—so far as I know."

"Was there any talk of India?"

"Not a word."

After a moment of silence, in which, as before, Sir Hugh pulled his long mustache, he turned to Vail with a smile.

"This is most unreasonable of me, this inquisition, old chap, but I've reasons, as you may suppose. May I ask if in any manner whatsoever I was a momentary subject of conversation over the tea?"

"Your name was never mentioned," answered Julian, with perfect truth. "The talk was almost wholly of plays."

Sir Hugh arose to go, but hesitated, as if with indecision. He looked at his host peculiarly.

"Beautiful girl, I declare—Lady Constance."

"Very," said Vail. "And charming—at least to all appearances."

His visitor was obviously nervous, and jerked at the hair on his lip.

"You'll not misunderstand or resent a friendly attitude, old chap?"

"Not in the least," said Vail. "Just the other way about." He waited for a moment and added, "It's something you hesitate to say?"

"Nothing much," said Sir Hugh, a fine, grave expression in his eyes, "only that I happen to know the lineage, history, and descendants of the house of Drew rather well, and, while it is not precisely impossible that such a thing should be, still——"

"You very much doubt that this is Lady Constance Drew?"

Sir Hugh extended his hand.

"You'll not esteem me a cad for planting a doubt that may be wholly without warrant?"

"On the contrary," said Vail, "I thank you heartily and assure you of my highest regard."

Then Sir Hugh was gone, leaving much for Julian to ponder.

CHAPTER XXXI

A WEAVING OF PLOTS

SUNDAY evening developed nothing new. The telephone was absolutely silent, save for a moment when Enid Puryn rang, with a tentative suggestion to Vail that she and Dick were alone.

No word arrived from Garrison. The void that had swallowed Barbara was echoing with emptiness, while Julian hoped for a sign. There were no evening papers to apprise him of the little or much the reporters had discovered of the man found murdered in the house where he had slept.

He had never been so restless in his life—never so bereft of an occupation to while away his time. Of the hundreds of brilliant homes in which he was certain of a welcome, not one appealed even slightly to the hungering something in his soul.

At nine he strolled to his favorite club, then turned away at the door. To walk seemed the one satisfaction that the night and city afforded. He traversed Central Park from end to end, and at midnight was home, as sleepless and aimless as before.

He was glad of Monday morning, with its toil. Moreover, it seemed as if the machinery of fate, as well as that of the city, started anew after one day's rest, and made almost anything possible.

At his office, however, there was nothing essentially new. Even the enginery of Wall Street, where his whole financial structure trembled with uncertainty, was only about to resume the mighty grind of its wheels that reduce things and men to gold or dross.

The few accumulated telegrams and letters of importance that arrived fell their ways with mechanical precision. It was not until well after ten o'clock, when the rush and roar of the business mechanism was once more well established, that the machinations of Gardner demanded an hour of concentrated labor. Julian was glad when it came, however, and he threw not only all his reserves of money into the battle, but a measure of resentment as well. He would not be worsted all around!

To his great relief he found the accounts of the latest "ruby" murder entirely unalarming. The matter was treated with due regard for its fine sensational values, but even the name of Garrison was omitted. Not even the shrewdest reporter had connected the crime with that of the Maharajah. The mystery lay, so far as the papers were concerned, in the fact that a "crook" had met such an end in a house too empty to rob.

The noon hour arrived with never a word from the criminologist. Julian called up his office, to learn he was still away. There was no one he knew to whom to appeal for word of Barbara, whose silence fretted his spirit. He had never been so eager in his life for even a slender ray of hope.

It was something at least to know that Lady Kent

had lied about her engagement. Barbara, he was certain, was the victim of force, of compulsion. But, coerced or not, she had a right to a word of defense before being judged or condemned.

All day his thoughts were upon her. Then at last it came—the word for which he was hoping.

It arrived in the form of a tiny note, badly soiled, and directed in pencil. The opening lines were more than enough to stir his heart to maddest thumping.

"Dear Mr. Vail: I don't know what terrible things may have happened Saturday evening, after that tea, which made me ill, or what you must have thought of the way I behaved, but I haven't time to write you of it now. Indeed, I hardly know how or where I shall be able to mail this letter—and I dare not tell you where I am—but I must send a line to beg you not to believe a number of the things you heard that I could not deny while *She* was there, and to think of me kindly, if you can. To-morrow afternoon I expect to get my trunk at last—or at least get something from it. If you never hear from me again, after that, please believe it is all for the best, and try to remember once in a while that the sweetest, most precious, thing I have ever known was to be called

"Your 'Little Friend.'"

Vail was nearly crazy with delight. Had the letter been the clearest, most authentic vindication of Barbara in the world, he could scarcely have prized it more highly.

He kissed it like a boy. He paced in rapture up and down the room in a glory of excitement. Her simplest word in repudiation of all he had undergone seemed to banish forever from his mind any possible thought of her guilt. Moreover, he was certain of her love—and that was more priceless than all! If only the slightest hint had been given as to where he could find her now, a cannon-ball's speed could hardly have met his requirements in hurling himself at her feet.

But abruptly, in the midst of his delirium, a new dread went home to his heart. She was going to search for her trunk. She had doubtless persuaded someone to assist her in finding it again. And of all the crime-reddened beings by whom she was surrounded and coerced, which one of the lot could be trusted to protect her in her quest?

He was certain the trunk could be in one place only—the house of iron men! This she had all but confessed.

Apparently no one save himself had ever connected this second house with the Maharajah's murder. It was under no suspicion. If she went, unprotected, to a place like that—God only knew what might occur!

"Garrison! Garrison!" he murmured. "Why couldn't you be here now when I need you most?"

Some way, for Barbara's protection, he must get to that house at once!

He snatched up the telephone, demanded Garrison's office, learned that the criminologist had left

the key to the "ruby crime" house with his assistant, and dashed from the place to secure that bit of metal as if he were lashed by a fiend.

Meantime a second pattern that the fates were weaving in the web was rapidly developing in the house Lady Kent had so recently deserted.

In a littered and half-finished room of the attic, where pots and pans, a kerosene stove, and a lot of soiled bedding suggested a none too inviting camp that necessity had called into being, two frightened men were in earnest consultation.

One was a big, red-headed hulk whose alarms had been frequently diluted with potent drink, from a glass that he constantly filled. Aside from his bloodshot eyes and haggard countenance, he might have appeared at least halfway respectable, since his clothing at least was not neglected.

The other was obviously low, though perhaps the more sober of the pair. He was small and possessed of a vicious physiognomy, suggesting that of a rat. His clothing was old and stained with dust and tobacco. Yet his wits were clearer than his friend's.

"Ye ain't goin' to quit me—'cause you can't," he remarked, as he tapped the other's hand with an empty but dripping glass. "I ain't agoin' to go like Nick, all by my lone, which same you can remember."

"What can we do? What can we do?" said the red-headed creature, helplessly. "This house is likely watched. We'll have two of them after us now."

"Blame it to yourself," was the cheering response of his comrade. "You had Vail to rights, and passed it up to Nick, after you was there on the job."

"But Vail has seen me before. He knows me, Scratch, he knows me."

"Scratch" showed his undisguised contempt for the man with whom he was partnered.

"So do I—know yeh fer a coward; that's the answer. I've a notion to cut you and git."

The haggard face became more ghastly.

"For God's sake, Scratch, don't talk like that. We're all right if we stick together."

"You're all right, if I stick by," corrected his friend, with asperity. "And I'll only stick on terms to suit myself! Mr. Moore, you're sure in a hole."

"We're in it together—unless we get the stone," responded Moore, whose color refused to return. "I'll do anything you say."

"Right-ho!" exclaimed Mr. Scratch, arising promptly. "Then come along to the tin-man house while we git the girl to rights."

"But why get her there," objected Moore, "when she's safe enough with a lady you know——"

"A lady! There you are!" interrupted Mr. Scratch. "And the same scared stiff, with your bunglin'! What's the good of the lady now?"

"Well, for the matter of that," argued Moore, in his desperation, "if we got the girl as you say, and held her, and let her send some word to Vail—do you think he'd bite again?"

Mr. Scratch could express great scorn, as his accent duly established.

"Them kind? When they're stuck on a pretty petticoat? Twenty times a day, if you work it right! I tell you it's my way or none."

Moore took time to reflect—and mix and dispose of a drink.

At length he ventured: "There may be something in her trunk I ought to see. But we couldn't get into the house again and not be promptly discovered."

"You leave that to me."

"And where would you take the girl?"

"That's my business, same as the other. You ain't done nuthin' but bungle till our necks is ready for the rope. Jest take two minutes decidin', or it's me to pass you up and go it on my lone. You're in this worse than me."

Despite the show of nerve he maintained, he was fully as frightened as his pal. A certain professional hardening, that the other lacked, afforded him his mask.

Mr. Moore was coldly perspiring. He had one more objection to offer.

"Suppose when we have her, just as you like, we're fooled again by Vail? Suppose he's given up the ruby? I tell you, Scratch, if we make a mistake —if we don't get the ruby directly——"

"Oh, stow it!" his friend interrupted. "You've said that two hundred times. Can you think of a better frame-up than mine?"

Moore shook his head in despair.

"No—I'm afraid I can't."

"Then come on. You're afraid of everything, so what's the odds where you git it next?"

Moore's face blanched.

"But—why go so early as this? They won't get after the trunk till maybe four."

"Cree?" demanded Mr. Scratch. "Ketch her foolin' around there late! Likely you'd rather git around when they'd pinched the trunk and made their get-away. Not me! Have you got some sheets to bag the women's heads?"

Moore wavered.

"Do we have to use violence—and force?"

"Do you want to bungle this again?"

"But—I'm sure I could manage to get the girl in a quieter, safer way."

"Yes!" said Mr. Scratch, in his scornful sneer, "I don't suppose she's got you plenty buffaloed with threats to peach to Vail. Now listen to this—debates is closed! Are you comin', and comin' my way?"

"I hope it's the best," said the craven, weakly. "We can get some sheets below."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE HOUSE OF IRON MEN

AS Vail had declared, in his hasty review of the newest situation, the street where one of the city's rapidly forgotten crimes had been committed contained no evidence that either the "Maharajah" house or its nearby neighbor of the armor was under police surveillance. Indeed, a more deserted thoroughfare would rarely have been encountered in Gotham.

It was nearly three in the afternoon when at length a big blue limousine car came softly purring down the street. A liveried chauffeur sat in charge of the wheel. Within were two women, one tremendously excited, the other as wary as a fox.

They were Barbara and her plausible acquaintance, Mrs. Cree—who had names for each day in the week. This lady, with every protestation of confidence in and the simplicity of the present enterprise, nevertheless subjected the region to the sharpest scrutiny as the car drew near the house for which she held the key.

At the very second when the man at the wheel would have steered in and halted at the curb, a

grocer's wagon swung around the corner and came clattering down the street.

Mrs. Cree leaned quickly to the speaking-tube with its end near the driver's ear.

"Go on," she said, "around the block and back."

The round of the block was made, while Barbara, white and breathing shortly, sat crouched in the corner of the seat. Her companion watched as before, especially to see if they were followed.

Nothing sinister appeared. Once more they approached their objective point, and on this occasion, as the street was clear, the limousine came to a halt.

Mrs. Cree pulled down a heavy veil that masked her features completely. Then, with exceptional celerity of movement, she alighted and urged her charge to the sidewalk.

The driver, under previously delivered instructions, proceeded at once down the street, even as the two quickly-acting women climbed the steps and went into the house.

"There!" Mrs. Cree breathed quietly, as the door was closed behind them. "No one the wiser for our coming!"

Barbara made no reply. Nothing could have nerved her to this ordeal save the hope she possessed at the prospect of researching her trunk. Her first vague alarm subsided, though what she had feared in gaining the house was entirely vague in her mind. A new sort of fever possessed her now with every added moment of delay.

Mrs. Cree, however, was cautious. She lifted her veil to the top of her hat, went quietly over to a door that stood ajar, peered in, stood listening for any possible sound, and then smiled reassuringly.

"We may as well go upstairs."

Barbara timidly followed, glancing about at the ill-lighted features of the place and conjuring up, as a sort of protective vision, the image of Vail she had seen that other exciting day when, as now, she had come for the papers in her trunk.

"You are sure it's here?" she ventured to ask, in a barely audible voice. "Do you know what room it's in?"

"You'll see," replied her companion, whose confidence rapidly increased. "It hasn't been just left around."

A startling snap resounded from the stairs and echoed through the hall, as they started for the second story. Barbara clasped at her heart in alarm, while Mrs. Cree laughed at her fear.

"Did you think it was a ghost?" she inquired. "Losh! ghosts are worth such money these days you couldn't even catch one if you tried."

They had come to the landing above.

"This way," she added, moving ahead as one familiar with the place. "Ain't it funny, my dear, where they used to build their closets?"

The room to which she led the way was small, dark, and off the hall. Its second door, aside from that to a closet, was standing a trifle ajar, and opened on other apartments.

"Right in here," said Mrs. Cree, as she opened the closet in question. "It never could have been safer. We'll both have to pull it to a better light."

Tremendously relieved at beholding her trunk, after constant fears that it was never to be recovered, Barbara willingly lent her strength to dragging the box from its place.

It was poorly strapped, and locked. They hauled it out together, then moved it across the floor.

"Just open that door behind you," instructed Mrs. Cree.

Barbara threw it open—and stood there staring, amazed.

She was facing the room of iron men, with a monster round table at its center.

Six dully gleaming figures, like metal ghosts, for silence and their weird resemblance to men, were ranged along the opposite wall with a half-light only upon them. They stood on a platform built the length of the room. Behind each lurked a shadow as dark as a dungeon's door. In their fixed, semi-life-like postures they were certainly uncanny to behold.

The laugh Mrs. Cree delivered gave Barbara a start.

"Fine company," said the woman, cheerfully. "How would you like 'em all night, and you here alone in the house?"

"They look so alive!" said the staring girl. "They almost seem to move."

"Well, we don't," responded her companion.

"We'll take this in amongst 'em, and hurry, too, if there's anything in it you want."

Once more they heaved at the heavy trunk and urged it into the room.

Barbara had the key. The lid was presently leaned against the frame of the door, revealing a flap, in the style of many of the old-time trunks, now rarely seen, and to this Barbara gave her attention.

She had barely dropped it down, to remove some hats, when a sounding snap reverberated sharply through the house.

Mrs. Cree clutched her quickly by the arm, her own face blanched with fear.

"What was that?"

Barbara trembled where she stood, glancing furtively about.

"I don't know," she whispered. "Oh, I hope——"

"Sh-s-s-sh," said Mrs. Cree.

She tiptoed silently towards the door that led to the secondary hall. She had no more than come there than she suddenly uttered a piercing shriek and staggered back into the room.

A curse replied, from out beyond, then the tramp of heavy feet as someone ran to the door.

Barbara, held there as rigid as ice, beheld two men dart actively in, both of them thoroughly masked.

A stifled cry escaped her lips as she saw the larger of the ruffians plunge with a sack to smother Mrs. Cree. The smaller man was running towards herself.

In sheer desperation she flung an old hat in his face and turned to flee around the table.

The man leaped in active pursuit.

There was no escape at either door. Mrs. Cree was struggling in the path of one, the trunk was blocking the other.

Around again sped the frightened girl, the man almost upon her.

Then an amazing thing occurred.

With a ringing shout, like an old Crusader's battle cry, the nearest man of iron leaped like a mailed and infuriated Nemesis from the platform, to land on the ruffian's neck. The fellow went down to the floor, with a yell of terror and awe. The iron knight crashed down upon him, with a din of clanking plates.

Scream after scream resounded through the house, where Mrs. Cree with frantic might was battling with the man who had attacked her.

Then Barbara cried out again, but now in joy. A tall, active figure had risen from the mêlée on the floor.

"Julian!" she shrilled, reeling weakly to the table; then she felt the mighty comfort of his arms.

A fearful din of thumping came from the hall below. The door was being stormed by men who had secretly watched the house.

Aware of the folly of permitting himself and Barbara to be found in such a place, and unprepared to do battle with both the men, while a helpless girl

was there to afford them a target, Julian dashed with her headlong past the pair by the door and fled for the panel in the wall.

"The roof!" he heard abruptly shouted, where the smaller thief had once more gained his feet, and then, amidst dull clattering and blows, the sound of officers swarming up the stairs, and the cries of Mrs. Cree, he thrust back the panel, supported Barbara through the yawning door, and was presently fumbling for an incandescent torch, laid carefully by for his needs.

He had barely closed the sliding door when men came running to the room.

Barbara's strength had departed, yet she had not actually swooned. He took her up in his arms and flashed his light that showed him the way downstairs.

He reached the base of the circular steps, panting from his exertions. The long, dark corridor yawned before him forbiddingly, but he welcomed both its silence and its chill.

Pausing a moment to regain his breath, he proceeded onwards as before. A wild exultant joy was in his heart. It increased as Barbara, supported on his breast, slipped one arm weakly about his neck and clung to him, softly crying.

At the end of the passage he placed her down, for the door to the cellar was closed.

"All right, little friend, we're all right now," he told her, reassuringly, his arm still encircling her waist, but she made no attempt to reply.

He opened the door and assisted her through before him. It had barely closed upon them when out of the darkness of the old-time cellar four half-seen men sprang upon them and pinioned Vail's arms to his sides.

Then the blinding glare of a bull's-eye lantern was turned upon his face.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THEIR HOUR IN THE PARK

FOR one tense moment there was not a sound, save one little cry that issued from Barbara's lips. Then came another surprise.

"Holy smoke!" said a voice. "What's the use? It's you again?"

"Garrison!" said Vail. "Is that you, Garrison?"

"Who else could have my luck?" was the criminologist's answer. "Nettleton, strike a light, till I gather my wits! I might have known the birds would fly by the roof!"

The men, as well as Barbara, were puzzled by what they heard.

"Do you mean these is no good, after all?" said one, who had gripped his vice-like talons on Vail. "You don't want me to hold 'um no more?"

"No, no—release him, certainly," was Garrison's prompt reply. "Get out, up front—you and Hawthorne—see if you're needed with the others."

Nevertheless, as Nettleton scratched a blazing match and applied it to a torch, the two big fellows ordered to the street paused a moment to look at the girl.

Barbara clung to Julian's arm like the veriest

frightened child. Since the days when witches were tried in dungeon keeps, perhaps because of their beauty, no more appealing vision of loveliness distraught was ever revealed by the light.

With her great eyes blazing with the liquid clearness of a deer's, her red lips slightly parted, her wondrously dark-red hair disheveled, and her color only faintly returning to cheeks as white and translucent as snowy onyx, Barbara seemed some hunted nymph as she leaned there on Julian's arm. Her bosom still heaved with excitement and alarm. A wistful questioning burned in the glance she cast about her on the men.

Garrison took off his hat, no more in tribute to her beauty than in recognition of her innocence, no matter what facts might accuse.

"Miss Lee," he said, "I must present myself, I fear. I'm Jerold Garrison, a poor, benighted friend of Mr. Vail's, vainly striving to render him a service. My one regret must always be that we could not have met under pleasanter conditions—and sooner."

Barbara tried to smile.

"Thank you very much," she answered, faintly. "I'm afraid I've been a lot of trouble."

"But why stay here?" said Julian, longing to get Barbara away. "Can't we get out to the light?"

"Certainly," said Garrison. "You see, I expected someone else. I'm a little disappointed."

He led the way promptly to the cellar stairs and the hall of the echoing house. There he halted.

"Mr. Vail, I must see you soon. This place will soon be full of policemen. May I once more offer you my car?"

"You're a trump, old man!" said Vail. "Do you happen to know the very best place in all New York for Miss Lee to be safe to-night?"

Garrison's eyes burned brightly. "I do. Take her at once to my wife."

A lump came at once in Barbara's throat, she hardly knew why.

"Oh, by George!" said Vail. "But you're sure——"

"Absolutely!" Hurriedly writing the address and a line of explanation to his wife, Garrison thrust his card in Julian's hand. "Don't stop to be polite," he added, smilingly. "Your time is brief."

He urged them out of the door, to the curb, where his car was waiting, in charge of a hired chauffeur.

A shout was raised from the house of iron men, where a blue-coat came dashing down the walk.

"Speed her up to the limit," Garrison instructed, laconically, and, seeing the car quickly started on its way, he turned and caught the policeman in his arms.

For a moment both Vail and Barbara were too occupied for speech. They were watching the man in pursuit. But the car rolled briskly around the corner and the scene was left behind. The last impression was one of men hotly swarming from both the houses.

It was presently certain that no one was following behind.

Julian leaned over to the driver.

"To Mr. Garrison's house, if you please;" and he read the address from the card. "You might take it just a bit slower and go by way of the Park."

Then he settled for at least a little comfort and took Barbara's hand in his own.

She had sunk in her corner of the tonneau, still pale, but faintly smiling. She met his gaze in her steady, brave way, her eyes appealingly wistful.

"You must have been there all the time," she said, beholding again that astonishing sight of the leaping iron man. "I was never so glad to see anyone—— I was never so frightened in my life."

He asked, "Who were the men?"

"Why, I don't know! I haven't the slightest idea. How long had you been behind that armor thing?"

"Two hours, about. But tell me, Barbara——"

"Two hours!"

"Waiting to serve you if I could. Had you no idea of the risk you ran in going to such a place?"

"I had to go," she answered, honestly. "What will they do with my trunk?"

"I should say Mr. Garrison will get it.—Barbara, isn't it time at last to tell me what is going on? Perhaps this isn't the time or place," and he nodded towards the driver, "but things can't go on

as they have, you know, for affairs have come to a crisis."

She was silent for a moment, and withdrew her hand at last.

"I haven't been fair, of course, from the first, but when one's father—when one's afraid—— Oh! now that Mr. Garrison may get the papers, after all, couldn't we—— How can I go to his house? I agreed to return to——"

"Lady Kent?" he added, at her pause.

Barbara dropped her gaze.

"She has been very kind—some ways, I mean. I'd rather not offend her—make her angry—run away and get her started—— I don't know what she'll do!"

"What can she do? What is this power she wields over you and your fate? Why did you let her hustle you off on our way up from Hackett Tides? What's all this mystery about?"

The appeal came back to her eyes.

"Didn't you say this was not the place—the time—for all these questions?"

"We've got to have it out," he told her, simply. "We'll stop in the Park for a while to ourselves, and walk the last few blocks."

The Garrisons lived in Central Park West, overlooking the reservoirs. Julian waited till the chauffeur was swinging through the western section of the great reserve of grass and trees, then requested him to halt where a bench was sequestered in the shade.

"You may leave us here, if you please," he said. "We prefer to walk to the house."

The man saluted and drove away, to return the car to his chief.

"But really——" started Barbara, when Julian took her firmly by the arm and marched her towards the seat.

"We couldn't talk at Garrison's, and we've got to have it out."

Barbara slightly trembled.

"I don't see how I can tell things—even now," she timidly objected. "I'd have told you before if I could."

He sat her down and took the place beside her.

"It might have saved trouble if you had. We were getting a better understanding when you were suddenly spirited away. To get back to that, was it Lady Kent who won that little trick?"

"No—it was—somebody else?"

"You fear to tell me whom? It was someone you fear, I'm certain, as you seem to fear Lady Kent. Do you know what occurred when I drank that cup of tea?"

She looked at him in affright.

"No, for I was ill."

"Tell me this," he demanded, eagerly: "Did you enter that room again presently and see me, over by the window?"

"Why, certainly not. I couldn't come down again."

This much he could readily believe. He had

made up his mind it was someone else who had laughed in derision at his plight.

"Barbara, something black and horrible is behind these friends of yours," he said. "I call them friends—perhaps they are not—I know they're not genuine friends. What is it you fear, that you will not share with me, after all we've been through together?"

Her face was white and tense.

"It's something I'd rather not tell."

"But give me a chance," he beseeched her. "You know by now you can trust me to help you—to the end. It is something about your father, I imagine."

She nodded, her eyes pleadingly dilated.

"If only they hadn't come to-day! If I'd found the papers in the trunk! Yet they may not be there! Suppose I should tell you something that would end our friendship forever? And it might be wrong! I wrote you perhaps you'd never see me after to-day. You don't think that was an easy thing to say? I can't tell things that might do wrong to everyone concerned! I simply won't! If I get the papers and find it's true—I couldn't face even you!"

She arose and turned away, to hide her distress and emotion.

Vail was instantly at her side.

"Barbara, I love you!" he said. "Do you hear me?—I love you! I love you!" He caught her and kissed her on the mouth. "You shan't go away and leave me so again. You've got to let me fight your battles. I want you to marry me, right away,

and give me the right to protect you! Sweetheart —my loyal little friend—we'll face the world together!"

She could not, had it been to save her life, have resisted that moment of joy. Nothing so wondrous, so glorious had ever swept upon her with its power. A madness, divinely ineffable, coursed through her welcoming pulses. She was swept away on the storm of his love like a willing bird hurled into summer. She gave him the answer of lips to lips before she could think what it meant. She tasted the marvelous wine of love before she had power to resist. She loved him with all the power of her being; she longed for the haven of security in his arms; she had never been so tempted to exchange her loneliness for companionship, her heart's and spirit's homelessness for the glowing hearth of love.

Then she pantingly thrust him away.

"No, no, no," she implored. "Please don't say it any more. I mustn't! I will not! Julian, I love you too much—— I mean—I mean I don't—I don't love you enough! You shan't!—I'd rather die!"

"You do!—you love me!" he insisted, passionately. "You couldn't help it when I love you so! You shan't refuse! You've got to let me have the right to protect you night and day!"

Her mastery came reluctantly since it meant she must push him away. The smile that crept wistfully back to her lips was a beautiful thing to see.

"Not for the world—the happiest, dearest world

God ever made!" she answered, in her new resolution. "So please don't say it again."

He could feel both her strength and her weakness —the one that held him far away, the other that welcomed him home. He was strangely aware of the potent something, whipping her back to a path of stones she had traveled so long, alone.

He felt her nobility and courage—the readiness for sacrifice that prompted all she did. It drew him the more, cemented his love—exalted the passion she inspired.

"I can't give you up, no matter what has occurred. I love you!" he said. "I refuse to accept your decision! Barbara, what is the world and its views to those who make worlds with their love? You've got to listen, little friend!" And he moved to enfold her as before.

"No!" she answered, pleadingly. "Please take me to your friends."

She retreated, as one leaving all the world of beauty and comfort behind. Her eyes were brimming with tears of joy and bitter self-denial. She conjured a smile, inexpressibly lovely, to meet his beseeching eyes. Then she turned and continued along the path, unable to endure it any longer.

"Dearest!" said Julian, following, "you don't know the way to the house."

He made no attempt to halt her again, but merely walked at her side. They were silent, quitting this city-surrounded Eden, nevermore to be merely a park, to them, but a sacred grove instead.

At length, emerging to the street and facing the stone wall of houses, Julian abruptly comprehended how much still remain unrevealed.

"You'll promise you'll not run away again, or go back to Lady Kent? You'll remain with Mrs. Garrison, at least till we find your trunk?"

"You're going to hunt for it, too?"

"Why, naturally, little friend. You'd hardly expect that I'd leave it even to my friends?"

"No, of course—I suppose——" she faltered. "Someways I'd rather that no one but you—— But —Julian—if you happen to be the first—if you find it—please let me have it—all alone. You will, you will, I know."

"Will you promise not to run away, no matter what it contains?"

Bravely she met his eyes. "I'll do—what's best—for us all."

"Will you let me have a little voice in what is best for me?"

"If I have the strength—I'll try."

"You'll let me come and see you here, to-night?" They had come to the Garrisons' house.

"Perhaps—if it's really wise."

Then Julian rang the bell.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A DRAMATIC CLIMAX

VAIL did not again see Barbara that evening. He sent a magnificent armful of roses and a monster box of chocolates at eight and followed his gifts in half an hour, only to learn that Miss Lee had a violent headache, and, under orders from Dorothy Garrison, had sensibly retired.

She had written a note, in case he should come and meet this disappointment.

"Dear Mr. Vail:—I know I have been a very great trial and trouble to you, ever since that day I found myself in your office, and now I'm almost ashamed to ask another favor. But there is no one else I may turn to, or feel so certain I may trust. To-day you spoke of my trunk again, and of course you know it is very important to me—that is, I am almost positive it contains some papers I have never been able to find—even when I had it all to myself. They must be in it somewhere—doubtless in a secret slide, or something of that nature, and I'm afraid I'm ill with worry about them, after what has happened to-day.

"If they fell into anyone's hands but yours I

might not receive them to read them first and—— Well, I must! I simply must! I cannot tell you how much this means to me. But if only you could get them for me, right away, and not let *anyone* know they are in the trunk, or anything about them, I would be more than merely grateful all my life. I know this is a great deal to ask, when I have acted so badly—but you have made me trust you—and—— I just had to ask you, that's all.

"Ever your faithful 'little friend,'

"BARBARA."

In his zeal and eagerness to serve her instantly, Vail would have bolted forthwith for the house of iron men, had not two things given him pause. The first was his acknowledged ignorance of what had transpired at the place since their escape; the second was a call on the telephone, from Garrison himself, who had not been home for dinner.

"Hullo, old man!" he called across the wire, when Julian took the receiver. "I thought I might just possibly catch you at the house. How's Miss Lee? . . . Oh, I'm sorry to hear it. . . . Well, she'll be all right in the morning. . . . Hope you like her hostess. She's been through some trials herself. . . . But I didn't call you up to throw bouquets at my wife. I want you to meet me at once at the home of Miss Puryn. . . . Yes, Miss Puryn's—as soon as you can come. I have something important to report to you both, and prefer to submit it there. . . . Now please permit me to manage this one little mat-

ter my way. . . . Oh, if you've got a taxi waiting, you can get here in fifteen minutes. . . . Yes, she's there. I've just finished making the appointment. . . . All right. I'll be there when you arrive."

Reluctant to leave the neighborhood where Barbara was lodged, and not particularly pleased at the prospect of encountering Iris again, Vail nevertheless departed at once and was driven across the Park.

All the way he gravely pondered what Garrison might have discovered that called for this manner of report—this double-barreled method of unburdening facts, doubtless vital to the case concerning his birthday "gift." He felt it was far more important that he and the criminologist should be closeted somewhere together, over later aspects of the case.

He was thoroughly impatient to know what had happened where the men and Barbara's woman companion had been left embroiled about the trunk. He was equally eager to be informed what might have become of Barbara's property, with all those policemen overrunning the place.

When he came to the Puryn mansion it was almost wholly dark. Garrison's car was standing at the curb. Garrison himself was already upstairs, where Vail was promptly conducted.

The two men had barely exchanged a formal greeting, in the room to which, so often in the past, Julian had been directed, when Iris came in, with the slightest nod and conventional smile for each.

Garrison promptly came to their business.

"May I close the door?" he asked their hostess,

quietly, with a gesture towards the one open entrance. "My report is rather confidential."

"Certainly," Iris answered, seating herself in her favorite chair, near the Oriental hangings. "But I trust Mr. Vail may have mentioned that all this matter is of less importance now than it might otherwise have been."

Garrison looked from one to the other.

"I'm afraid my wits are dull from overuse."

Vail answered dryly, "Miss Puryn has honored herself by a discontinuance of our former relationship."

Garrison nodded.

"I should say the matter has lost little if any significance, inasmuch as you both desired my services in clearing up a certain train of facts, respecting the so-called birthday 'gift' to Mr. Vail."

Iris tried to look bored. As a matter of fact she was intensely curious.

"I trust your report is brief," was all she replied.

"Brief, but a trifle complicated," was Garrison's response. "I wish to make it quite complete, so far as it has its bearing on the houses of Puryn and Vail. In the first place, Miss Lee informed you both, upon being released from the box, that she came from Hartford, that she had no friends in Manhattan, and that she was wholly ignorant as to how or why she came to be delivered as she was to Mr. Vail."

"She told an untruth," said Iris.

"Her statement was essentially accurate in every particular," corrected the criminologist, quietly.

"Her 'friends' came afterward, but that has no part in the matter I came to submit. I have already informed Mr. Vail that the cardboard case was made by Epsilon, the florist, on orders apparently emanating from one of his wealthy acquaintances, who was actually on the ocean at the time."

Iris was eager for the story.

"She gave the order and sailed?"

"I said the order was given in her name. As a matter of fact it came from a wholly different source. The matter has never been exactly a joke, although its serious consequences were perhaps not foreseen by all concerned in the plan."

Iris spoke again.

"It was not a woman at all?"

"All in good time. A deliberate conspiracy was hatched by a group of persons to deliver a living young woman in a box to Mr. Vail. Through added complications the affair became positive crime, of the most extraordinary nature. There has not been a moment since that day and hour when Mr. Vail's life has not been in imminent danger."

Iris was pale.

"But who did it? And why was it done?"

"It was done primarily, Miss Puryn, with pernicious intent to arouse your jealous—I mean your natural resentment—to bring about the precise results, as between yourself and Mr. Vail, that you inform me have taken place."

"It was not through any fault of mine!" said Iris, sharply. "I have nothing to regret in that,

Mr. Garrison. But—you don't mean to hint that friends of Mr. Vail planned—— Oh, I don't mean that, of course!"

Julian merely smiled.

Garrison made a gesture of despair.

"Let me clear it up as rapidly as possible. A certain woman, secretly admiring Mr. Vail, though entirely unencouraged, sought out a female charlatan—a woman well known to the city police for connections with thieves, procurers, and the like—to enlist her services in bringing about the outrage of which you are aware."

"Well—who is she, then? Who is the woman so desperately in love with Mr. Vail?"

Julian, red with anger and mortification, sat in absolute silence, still fixing his eyes on Garrison's face, as the latter proceeded with his story.

"This woman conspired with one 'Madame Starlight,' so called, to break the relationship between yourself and Mr. Vail, having an utterly heartless disregard for the fate of Miss Lee, yourself, or anyone else concerned. She paid all the expenses of the infamous plot, whereby an innocent girl was involved in an astonishing network of crime, and has worked her devices since—but without conspicuous success.

"She has managed so to surround Miss Lee and Mr. Vail with complications that neither is safe in this city. Two men have already lost their lives in the working out of the plot and related crimes. This guilty woman is directly answerable for the

whole affair and is certainly liable to arrest, imprisonment——"

Vail stood up.

"But, Garrison, who is the woman?"

A strange smile came to the features of the criminologist.

"Her name, betrayed by Mádame Starlight——"

A sudden shriek rang out through the room, from behind the Persian hangings, used to conceal a door.

The woven fabric was seized with convulsive motion.

Iris and Garrison sprang to their feet, as Vail was running forward.

It was Julian who flung the hangings aside—*revealing Enid Puryn on the floor.*

Iris sank on the couch, appalled and white, covering her face with her hands.

Enid had fainted where she lay.

CHAPTER XXXV

AN UNFINISHED MISSION

IT was not until the two grim men had ridden several blocks down the Avenue that Garrison finally spoke.

"I hate these affairs that involve our decent people. They take it so hard when the punishment comes that it almost excites us to pity.—But, what could I do?"

"Good heavens!" said Vail, "you couldn't have spared her, of course!—I'm sorry for Iris, for at least she is innocent."

"I suppose I might have managed it less painfully," Garrison confessed, "but this Madame Starlight had not given up Miss Puryn's name, and, inasmuch as I am convinced that Enid has listened there before, I thought I'd take the chance to-night to confirm or refute my deductions."

"Oh, don't explain the thing to me!" said Julian, still thoroughly aroused. "I am sure she was there the very night of my birthday, while I was talking to Iris. I am equally convinced she made Iris ill the night of the Comity Ball. But—Garrison—the whole dénouement is a shock. That was awful for a while!"

"Yes," agreed the criminologist, "I never get used to a scream like that, and I fear I never shall."

Vail gripped him tightly by the arm.

"Enid had no connection with the ruby?—the thefts and murders, of course?"

"Not to her knowledge. However, that part of the case is incomplete."

"You don't know how the ruby came to be in Barbara's shoe?"

"I am not sufficiently certain to state my theories yet."

"But at least she is innocent?"

Garrison smiled.

"You have been convinced of that from the first —or nearly certain."

"Quite certain—absolutely sure—as I've told you repeatedly."

"Yet not so certain that you felt you could acquaint me with all the facts. For instance, how long have you known of the secret passage from the 'ruby' house to the other?"

Vail reddened.

"If I found it ahead of you, I'm not so slow."

"You haven't been accused of being slow, but you're not precisely what I'd call communicative."

"That reminds me," Julian responded. "What was accomplished to-day? Did you get the men, or the woman?"

"The woman, yes. The men escaped over the roof."

"And what about the trunk I saw in the room?"

Garrison replied with a question.

"Do you happen to know whose it is?"

"I imagine we both know it's Miss Lee's. She has been without it all these days. Where is it now?"

"It's there. We left it for a bait. I halfway expect one of those men, if not the pair, to return to overhaul it. My man is concealed on the premises, to sleep there and eat there for a while, in case they should arrive."

"Is he armed?"

"To the teeth."

Vail was silent for a moment, and Garrison continued.

"You found that passage the day you and I were searching the 'ruby' house together. Had you told me about it at the time, we might have made much greater progress. Suppose I take the wheel and we ramble through the Park, while you post me on all you really know?"

"Right!" said Vail, and he and Garrison were presently riding in the forward seat, while the driver was dismissed for the night.

"Begin at the first," said the criminologist, "and give me everything."

Julian obeyed. He related every minute detail in the whole affair, dating from Barbara's arrival in the box.

His narrative concerning the night at Hackett Tides was absolutely frank, for the safety of the story with Garrison was certain, and established Barbara's loyalty, her honesty and courage beyond the

shadow of a doubt. Concerning the girl's abduction from his car he was brief, but clear. There was nothing withheld about the drugging of his tea, his estimate of Lady Kent, or the revelations made by Sir Hugh Pearson. He kept back nothing, save Barbara's worry about the trunk and the papers it might contain.

"You will see that I need your services quite as decidedly now as before," he finally concluded. "The mystery clinging about Miss Lee is essentially as dark as ever. I want you to clear her of the ruby business and help me wrest her from the evil influence of Lady Kent, this fellow 'Willard,' and everyone else in the group. And that reminds me to ask, What woman was it you captured there to-day?"

"The one called Mrs. Cree. I rather fancy it was she who abducted Miss Lee from your car."

"Then she shares in some knowledge that all of them use for their pressure on Barbara?"

"Undoubtedly. Have you formed any theory as to what it may be that gives them this undue power?"

Julian looked at him peculiarly.

"I haven't exactly cared to face—— I have feared my ignorance—my blundering—— With you it's different, it's business.—I suppose you've formed an hypothesis. May I ask you what it is?"

"Certainly—when it's proved."

Julian was silent for a moment.

"It would please me enormously, Garrison," he said, at length, "to hear you confirm my faith, my

conviction that the little girl—that Miss Lee is—all I believe."

Garrison reached out from the wheel by which he guided the car to grip his companion's shoulder.

"Haven't I sent her to my wife?"

"Forgive me," said Vail. "I'm an ass!" Again he was silent, looking out across the placid lawns and through the motionless trees of the Park, at the stars and the lamps of the city. They were passing the end of the huge Metropolitan Gallery of art, and on their left rose the obelisk, once neighbored by the Sphinx.

His thought had reverted to the note lying close to his heart. He could not keep the faith that Barbara expected and reveal all he knew of her trunk.

"Old chap," he presently added, "I want you to do me a favor."

"It's granted already—if it's possible."

"I want you to let me go to that house and watch with your man for those chaps to come, as you said, to overhaul the trunk."

Garrison halted a query that rose to the point of his tongue. How much or how little of Julian's purpose he conjectured was not to be revealed. If Vail still chose to keep him in the dark, he meant to respect his silence. He betrayed no curiosity.

"You wouldn't care to go there now—to-night?"

"Well—I don't know why not—if there's any chance at all for your visitors to come."

"There isn't a chance, I'm sure, or I shouldn't be out here killing time while I'm waiting for someone

—but that's another story. Still, if you feel you cannot sleep in any other dwelling—— You've still got your gun and a key to the 'ruby' house. There are three or four electric torches under the cushion of your seat.—But it may be the fellows care nothing at all for the trunk, and your wait will be in vain. I'm inclined to believe they came there to-day with you as their ultimate object."

"When they immediately attacked the women?"

"Suppose they had carted off Miss Lee and then she had written you to come—would you have refused?"

"I shouldn't exactly have dared, if I thought——"

"That's about the way they figured. The trunk may be of no importance."

"I think I'll go there, nevertheless," said Julian. "I take it you would advise me to enter again by the ruby house and passage. What shall I do by way of signaling your man to avoid a collision with his weapons?"

"Knock on the panel before you press it open and call out, 'Nettleton!' Don't call too loud. He's to camp in that room, with alarms to all windows and doors. To-morrow two more will be with him. He'll be glad of your company to-night, for I fancy the waiting will be dull. I'll take you part way down there and let you continue by yourself."

He swung from the Park to the Avenue and was soon speeding down the town. At ten o'clock Vail was standing, alone, at the door of the house already held in superstitious dread.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A FIGHT IN THE DARK

FOR the third time Julian faced the secret passage.

There was absolute silence and absolute darkness throughout the premises where so much that was fateful had already had its setting. Not a soul had he seen in the thoroughfare when he made his entrance to the house. Every sound he created was like another presence, as it echoed through the empty spaces.

With his pistol in one hand and torch in the other, he was presently moving forward in the underground corridor, alert for the slightest disturbance or unusual feature of the place.

He came to the end of the passage duly convinced that so far all was the plainest sailing. Then his feet encountered something on the floor that emitted a crackling sound. The light was immediately turned in that direction.

What he saw was a litter of shavings, or the borings of an auger, strewn at the foot of the stairs. About to ignore them and ascend the steps, with the thought they had doubtless been there many years, he was halted by a mental insistence that they were clean and freshly made.

It was clear they could hardly have been transported far. He swung his torch about the wall, discovering nothing for a moment, till he moved fairly under the stairs. There he found indications of very recent work. Not only was the floor well covered by fresh yellow borings from pine, but the lines of holes from which the chips had fallen were there before his eyes.

They had all been driven through the planks that formed the wall of the passage, and each was plugged with a cork. They had plainly been made to cut a narrow door, or trap, to some cellar beyond, the opening formed having been closed fairly tight by wedging the piece to its place.

Vail was curious. He wondered not only who had cut the orifice in such a laborious manner, but likewise where it led. Slipping his gun in his pocket, he pulled out the wedges, making no sound, and the plank door slipped forth in his hand.

Instantly a gush of chilly air, with a powerful smell of gas, sent him backward from the place. What light he could flash through the opening met impenetrable gloom. Convinced that someone had cut the hole for a second entrance to the house, and reflecting that Nettleton might have provided this means of ingress and egress, to avoid the panel above, he retreated once more to the stairway and proceeded on his way.

From the hole left open no smells arose to the better air above, for the reason that cold air falls.

He was therefore unaware that a stifling volume of liberated gas was rolling forth in the passage, drawn by a draught through the trap.

Despite his utmost efforts at ascending without a sound, the stairway emitted a few faint creaks that frequently halted him to listen. It was not that he feared a possible attack from the house of iron men, but rather that he felt no sense of assurance he might not be followed from the rear.

But silence so deep that it rang in his ears possessed the premises. Once more he climbed carefully upward, his revolver as before in his hand. Then he met another surprise in the form of a draught lightly blowing in his face. He had scarcely more than observed this fact when he came to the head of the spiral stairs and paused with a sense of apprehension.

The panel was fastened open by a file, rammed into the sill.

Beyond utter silence reigned, in a chamber of velvety blackness. The flash of his torch dispelled a few feet only of the gloom, revealing not a thing upon the floor, for as far as he could see.

Wholly uncertain as to what this unexpected development might signify, and with plans quite deranged, Vail remained undecided as to what he were wise to do. About to deliver a knock on the door and call on Garrison's man, as previously directed, he caught at a sound from within the house that altered his decision.

The sound was as of something violently broken from its hold—a snap of steel and a rending of brittle wood.

He waited, straining his ears for sounds to follow. Something lightly banged against a distant wall. Then came a succession of lighter noises, as of things being tossed on the floor.

Julian entered the room. A hint that roused his indignation had flashed on his mind, and a species of recklessness anger possessed his being.

Feeling his way along the wall, with his torch kept dark for greater caution, he came to the door, emerged in the hall, and once more paused as a dull ray of light streamed out from the armory beyond.

More sounds of parcels flung about on the floor added fuel to his temper. Then, as he glided down the hall, towards the room of iron men, a human voice abruptly uttered some sound of satisfaction.

Julian was almost instantly at the door. What he saw made his blood fairly boil.

Kneeling alone by Barbara's trunk, the lid of which had been forced, was the evil-looking little "Scratch," with a torch in one hand, while the other held a large stained envelope, secured with tape and sealed.

He had found the secret recess of the box, and Barbara's fate was in his hands.

Julian lowered his revolver.

"Hands up!" he ordered. "Hands up, or I'll kill you on the spot!"

There was just one muttered curse from "Scratch," then his torch was instantly dark.

He was scrambling actively to his feet, when Vail plunged forward to get him.

He made no attempt to shoot, in the dark, as he thought of the door to another room through which his quarry might escape. But the burglar promptly fired.

With a leap of red flame and a deafening roar his bullet sped close to Julian's ear before they met by the table.

The two were instantly locked and wrestling wildly about the room, on which absolute darkness had descended.

There was no more chance for a shot on either side. If Vail was powerful and as relentless as a tiger, "Scratch" was no less active, desperate, or deadly.

He thrashed like a engine, gouged like a badger, and struck with his gun now held as a club. He was wiry, as hard and stiff as a pair of tongs, as furious and unmanageable as a wildcat.

Over against the table they were immediately hurled, then as hotly against the trunk and out on the floor in a whirlwind of fighting, where neither could see the slightest thing, but must feel as he grappled with his foe.

Except for the hard percussions of their breath, the scuffle of feet, and the thud of flesh on flesh, no sounds were made. Not a note escaped assailant or assailed.

In the mad mêlée of action they were hurled entirely across the room, and knocked down an iron man. Then backward and forward over its form they stumbled and fought. A second armor came crashing down, to encumber the floor and sound its metallic protest, where they struck it with their feet.

The table was driven hotly to the wall. The bundles thrown from Barbara's trunk were kicked in all directions.

The burglar, grappled a dozen times, squirmed loose like a human eel. He struck with his gun, and beat Vail's arm and shoulder.

Julian, versed in a finer art of wrestling, was handicapped doubly by the darkness of the place and the wild, vicious creature with whom he attempted to close.

No hold was secure for half a minute, no effort to choke the maniacal "Scratch," or lift him bodily up and crash him down, availed to end the struggle.

Around and around the room they gyrated, stumbling across the prostrate iron figures, colliding with the walls, blocking each other's efforts to deliver a telling blow.

Vail was attempting to choke or crush the active little demon eluding the strength of his hands. "Scratch," on the contrary, beat at his foe if his arm were free but half a second.

And at length he landed a glancing blow that nearly broke Julian's skull. It caught him just above the ear and inflicted an ugly wound. But it

served to arouse such a mighty wrath as nothing could safely withstand.

Blindly, without either thought or "science," Vail delivered a short-arm uppercut with all the might in his muscles. By the merest chance it caught his man on the vulnerable point of the chin.

In the darkness it felt as if a thing of clay had weakened to collapse. It sounded as if a bundle of rags went heavily down to the floor.

Julian permitted his grip to relax as his foe abruptly wilted. The gun had fallen before its owner slumped. It bounded against the iron plates that had once clothed a warrior's breast.

Pantingly crouched above the man he could now no longer hear even breathing, Julian presently lighted a match and blinked at the figure at his feet.

"Scratch" was unconscious, a white, crumpled bundle that barely quivered with life. Twisted awry the two armored figures lay, no more silent or useless than the man. The light dully gleamed from the rusted gun which the thief had used in his battle.

Vail caught it up without further delay, then went back to his torch, which lay where his fingers had released it.

Like a huge round target of yellow gleamed the light he threw about the room. It fell upon the envelope that "Scratch" had dropped in the fight. Vail promptly thrust it in his pocket.

Once more he returned to the prostrate man, lying

like one on a battlefield of old, with steel-clad knights about him. He made no movement whatsoever.

Aware that water and fresher air were highly essential to the fellow's recovery, and taking time at last to worry concerning Garrison's assistant, Julian raised his voice.

"Nettleton!" he shouted. His voice echoed weirdly through the silent place. Reflecting that the shot must have roused any watchman in or about the place, he hurried to the panel room, to cast his light upon its features.

There was nothing here, save the door still fastened opened, to indicate anything suspicious. Back to the hall and down to the lower rooms he hastened to make a wider search.

A sense of weakness, resulting from the cut on the side of his head, oppressed him slightly. Determined to go at once to the man up above, revive him, and make him prisoner, then compel him to answer for Garrison's assistant, he returned once more to the armory—and blankly gazed about in the target of his torch.

The man he had fought was gone.

A quick reconnoiter of the room, with his torchlight thrown even back of the forms in armor along their stand convinced him the fellow must have fled to another apartment. But the room with the panel told the tale, for the panel was not only closed again, but someway fastened on the stairway side, as Julian guessed, with the file.

Then he thought again of that hole below and the smell of gas from the cellar. The whole situation was dimly presented to his throbbing mind. He ran for the stairway and down to the hall to the regular entrance to the basement.

The cellar, like the rooms above, was cut into halls and divisions. He hastened from one to the other and was presented guided to a heavy door, where a smell of gas hung in the air.

This barrier swung inward, heavily, lifting weights that would close it when released. It was no more than barely opened than a rush of poisonous fume escaped that drove Vail reeling from the place. He was back there immediately, however, dragging a box, half-filled with dusty coal, to prop the door back from the frame.

Then, with the gas reek flowing thickly forth, as the draught from the hole he had opened changed its course, he threw in the rays from his glowing torch and beheld his man lying on the floor.

It was Nettleton, lured to the deadly place by some sound, or the odor of gas. He was barely alive and had only been saved by the entrance of air through the opening Vail had supplied when he drew the newly made trap from its place behind the spiral stairs.

Filling his lungs with the purer air, Julian plunged in the chamber, laid hold of the helpless Nettleton, and dragged him bodily forth.

Still unaware of the fact that he was bleeding, and attributing his sense of weakness to the impure air,

Vail strained and toiled to get the unconscious form to the hallway up above.

How he finally managed to boost and drag the inert figure to the outside door and slip the lock was more than Vail could have told. Later it seemed like some hideous nightmare, some horrid imagining that all his strength was abruptly sapped, while his work was half-done and was far too vast for human attainment.

Nevertheless, in his persistency he tugged the man through the vestibule and so to the outer air. Then at last he collapsed, as inertly as the form he had brought from the tomb of death. While Nettleton lay at the top of the steps, Julian rolled to the bottom.

CHAPTER XXXVII

AN HOUR OF RECKONING

VAIL awoke in his own apartments, possessed of a tissue of dreams.

A nurse was seated at his table, and a tall, gray-haired physician stood idly looking out at the window.

Julian made no sound. He blinked at the two in puzzlement, recalling some hazy, fantastic procession of events wherein a number of red-faced policemen, Jerold Garrison, fights, and the labor with Nettleton were confusedly intermixed.

Then the actual facts of the previous night came back like the echoes of the voice, with a sense of truth and conviction. He remembered it all, the furious battle with his unseen foe, the clatter of falling iron armor—and the object of his visit to the house.

At that he sat up suddenly, and felt a sharp pain in his head. The nurse was startled.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that! I wouldn't attempt to sit up," she said, arising to come to his side. "Doctor, Mr. Vail's awake."

"Doctor?" said Vail, as the man at the window turned. "Oh, Dale, hello! What's the meaning of

this?—this fuss and feathers and the rest? Where are my clothes?"

"Well, well," said Dale, coming swiftly to the bed. "It's about as I expected—more mere physical exhaustion and lack of proper rest than anything requiring my attentions. How's the head?"

"Head?" said Vail. "I didn't know I had one—a bad one, I mean. Did I get a little cut?"

"Do you mean to say you don't remember——"

"Hold on," Vail interrupted. "I don't need a nurse, and I do want my clothes, and—— I beg your pardon, Dale, for interrupting, but I'm anxious to know—— Will you tell me how I come to be in these rooms?"

Dale made a gesture to the nurse. She brought the clothes that Vail had worn and laid them on a chair. Then she quietly left the apartment.

Dale brought the garments across to the bed and held up the coat by the collar.

"Will you tell me first how you could bleed like that and never be the wiser? I say you were struck with a gun."

"I was, but——"

"Thank you, my son. I knew I was right from the start. Now, then, they found you half-dead on the street, and there you were arrested. That's the rule with the New York police. When a man's dead, or near it, lock him up. The other man they sent to the hospital because, by great good-fortune, he smelled of gas instead of gasoline."

"Nettleton, yes, I remember." Julian flung off

the bedding and rested his feet on the floor. "How did I get here after that?"

"The precinct sergeant telephoned to Garrison, at last, and he ordered you home, like the sensible person that he is. In fact, he brought you here himself and told me to 'phone——"

"What time of the morning is it now?"

"It's nearly ten."

"Good Lord! Do you mean to say I've slept——" He had risen promptly and caught up his coat to swing it around and search the pocket.

The envelope was gone.

He stared at the doctor blankly. A sickening sensation made everything swim before his eyes.

"Lie down! Lie down—there! by the Lord Harry!" said Dale, impatiently, noting the changed expression of his patient's face. "You are really hurt, after all!"

"Hurt?" repeated Julian, abruptly convinced that while he lay half-dead the man he had fought had come again and taken the papers from his coat. "Look here, who pulled off my duds?"

"I did," said Dale. "I was here when they carried you in."

"Did anything fall from my pockets?"

"Certainly not. Do you think I had nothing better to do than invert your gory garments?"

Vail could have groaned, till he thought of the criminologist, who might have taken care of the papers.

"Here, Dale, call up Garrison," he instructed,

"while I'm taking a splash and putting on some duds. Tell him to get to my office as quickly as he can."

"But, my dear Julian——"

"Yes, I know," said Vail. "You brought me into the world and all the rest. Will you please do as much for the telephone? After Garrison, order up some coffee, fruit, and rolls. I can breakfast while I'm dressing."

He dived at once into the bathroom, loaded with garments, hastily snatched for his use. The door remained wide open as the doctor obeyed directions.

"Hello!" that gentleman presently called, when the number had finally been given. "Garrison's office? Hello! . . . Yes. Mr. Vail I don't want you—I want your chief. I want . . . What's that? Not in? You're sure of that, young man? You're . . . Then when is he going to be in?"

Julian thrust his head from behind the door. "Not in? But where——"

The physician looked across from the desk.

"They don't know where he's gone."

"Tell them to send him straight to me the minute he returns!"

The message was sent.

Portions of Vail and a towel appeared as before.

"Order up the coffee and rolls. And tell them five minutes is the limit I can wait!"

The breakfast was soon on the way. Vail was half-dressed and moving like a freshly oiled machine

when the telephone bell jangled sharply. He ran to snatch up the receiver.

"Hello! hello!—is that you, Garrison?" he called. . . . "Oh, Broughton. Well? . . . Gardner? . . . Trying to cover—trying to buy? . . . No. Let it alone. I'll be down there in fifteen minutes—and finish him up by noon!"

"Young man," said Dale, "I'm going home. I'm no longer a doctor—I'm a valet."

"God bless you," said Vail, "you're a trump. I beg your pardon, dear old friend, but I've lost a lot of time. However, you never misunderstand."

He had flung off his bandage, discovered two stitches sewn in his scalp, and now greeted his waiter with the breakfast.

The physician held out his hand.

"You are doctor-proof," he said, with a smile. "I have always said your health and strength are incurable, in spite of all medical attacks. I'll drop in to see you later on."

When he had gone, and Julian rose from his hasty meal, to crowd on his hat and run to the taxicab ordered by the office, the throb and ache in the wound on his skull brought him down to a sensible walk.

It was only because of the greater worry, concerning the papers found and lost, that his physical pains were ignored. And the news from his office that Gardner was thus soon attempting to cover his shortage on B. & K. C. R. R., excited new zest in his fighting blood to make him forget himself.

The "Curb" and Exchanges had barely been

opened an hour when Julian's orders, telephoned and wired, began to be felt in those Wall Street pulses that may quicken or creep at a whisper.

They quickened that day, which was not to be soon forgotten. Gardner and all of his railroad group, who had busied themselves every hour of the day for more than a week to ruin Vail, were stricken with panic by noon. They had "shorted" on B. & K. C. R. R. till it had seemed to be fading from the list. They had hammered it down and chopped it down and sold it down to a finish—or so they blindly believed. Now the reckoning hour was at hand.

Some mere inside rumor that Vail and his loyal supporters had fed out their stock and loaned their stock to make this selling possible, and now in control of both long and short accumulations, were about to demand the return of all said loans, leaving no stock whatever in the market, induced the early efforts of some of the weaklings to cover. These were the traitors to Gardner, smaller, frightened bears, who felt they had played it sufficiently far and would quietly take out their profits.

These profits, like many in the Wall Street game, were unfortunately all on paper. The awakening came with a shock.

There was not a share to be had in the world of B. & K. C. R. R.!

It was all in the hands of Vail and his crowd, who proceeded to put on the screws.

The larger alarm began about eleven in the morning. The panic quickened, heightened, and screamed

through the lofty cañons in Broad Street and busy Exchange Place when the truth became bruited about.

After that it was one mad scramble for any stock at all, with Gardner the wildest bear in the ring. And Vail, at his desk, with the telephone in hand, dictated fates and money destinies and who should be spared and who ruined.

They were begging at last—imploring his mercy—a chance to get out with their lives. They had digged them a pit and fallen in and were shrieking mightily for help.

In the money pandemonium, at length extending to some of the banks allied with the Gardner interests, giants of finance were at last on their knees, beseeching a let-up of the squeezing. Then Vail, with his hand at the lever of control, made the terms when he wearied of his power.

It was fairly appalling, even then, to many who had gone to Gardner's camp. As for Gardner himself, the price he paid laid him prostrate at the scornful feet of the man he would have ruined.

It was over at one—all except the groaning—and Julian paused at last to bethink him of a lunch.

In the press of affairs he had taken no time to think of himself, or even of Barbara. No word had come from Garrison, whom he once more called on the telephone, without results.

Broughton, who alone of his force had been detained beside his chief, by special order, arose at last with a satisfied smile and took up his mass of papers.

"This just about closes the volume," he said, "so far as Gardner is concerned. Ever since that case came into the office, Mr. Vail, I have felt it was he you'd have to fight." He nodded towards the monster box in which Barbara had arrived.

Julian looked at it indulgently.

"I think it brought us luck—some kinds of luck, at least. I suppose it's time to have it carted away. You might just screw the cover on it lightly and I'll think where it had better be sent." He arose and put on his hat. "I'll be over at Del's for a snack to eat, if anyone calls while I'm out."

"You're coming back again?"

"I'll be back——"

He was interrupted by the telephone, which Broughton answered.

"It's Garrison's clerk," he said, a minute later. "Mr. Garrison's coming here at two, if you'll be in."

"Sharp two," said Vail, who was swiftly forgetting the morning's work as his thoughts of Barbara's documents, the ruby still in his vase, and a score of kindred subjects came rushing back to his brain, and then he went, while Broughton disappeared with his papers.

On the stroke of two by the monster bell in the Metropolitan tower, Vail discovered his private door ajar as he came once more to his office. He thought at once of Garrison, but no one was there in the place. Beyond the fact the big cardboard case had its cover lightly held in place, there was nothing to

show that a living soul had entered the room in his absence.

He was busied for fifteen minutes, and no Garrison appeared. He caught up the telephone and had only secured the criminologist's office when a well-known knock was sounded on the door.

Then, in response to his summons to enter, appeared not only Garrison, but also a big, alarmed-looking person, at whom Vail stared in surprise.

It was he whom he knew as "Willard"—the man with the brick-red hair.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE SACRED RUBY'S SLAVE

THAT the big red-headed being was not only acting under compulsion, but was likewise frightened to his marrow, Vail was promptly made aware.

Garrison desired his captive to sit in the strongest light, and ordered him there as he might have directed an animal whose intelligence had been scattered by alarm.

"Mr. Vail," he said, "permit me to make you acquainted with Mr. Willard Abbey, of endless aliases, once the framework of an English gentleman, and now a near-criminal, begging for mercy. He has come, partly by his own inclination, and partly by mine, to unburden his mind of a few confessions and to beg for his precious life."

Julian studied Mr. Abbey attentively, the while that ex-gentleman fidgeted in awkward guilt, shifting his eyes and the hat he held in his hands.

A vague apprehension crept to Julian's mind, at thoughts of what might presently be revealed concerning the fellow's relationship with the girl at Garrison's home. Yet he faced the situation grimly, aware he must probe it to the end.

"It's a pleasure to see you—in good tight quarters, Mr. Abbey," he said. "You are doubtless

ready to admit I have seen you before on at least two notable occasions."

Abbey's alarm arose from facts far more vital than Julian suspected. In seeking for Garrison, and incidentally arrest, he had chosen the lesser of two evil fates by which he was confronted.

"I'll admit that, certainly, Mr. Vail," he answered, in a treble voice that ridiculed his size. "But I hope, Mr. Vail——"

"It's a little premature to begin with your hopes," said Garrison, interrupting. "I wish you to state to Mr. Vail your entire connection with the affair involving Miss Lee, the murdered Maharajah, the Gatama ruby, and all the subsequent events."

Abbey settled further in his chair.

"Does Mr. Vail know how it started?"

"He knows that a certain lady here in New York set the original atrocity in motion. You may ignore that portion of the story and make the statement suggested."

"I was broke," began Mr. Abbey, obediently, "and I happened to think of Madame Starlight, and called to see her one Saturday afternoon. Miss Puryn was there at the time. She departed directly. Starlight made me unusually welcome and said she needed some unknown young woman to send to a man for a birthday gift, and wanted to know if I had any such in mind."

Garrison inquired, "Did she not also add that a parentless and friendless victim, from out of town, would be particularly acceptable?"

"Probably," was Abbey's admission. "As it happened I had long known Miss Lee—— I say, there's nothing new in this, you know. If Mr. Vail's already informed of this business, I would take it as a favor——"

"Get on!" said Vail.

"I will, Mr. Vail, certainly. Well, as I was saying, I mentioned Miss Lee as one to fill the bill, and Mrs. Cree, as a friend of mine, so Starlight got her down here, as you know, and had Cree take her directly to the house you're both informed of, which was formerly my uncle's—he having married here, you know, and his hobby being armor and all that sort of rot—and then I made the mistake of procuring the services of Lawbit, Scratch Parkinson, and others, who mixed us all up in the murder and the ruby theft, and all the rest of the mess. And about that ruby, Mr. Vail——"

"We'll come to that in time," was Garrison's interruption. "After Miss Lee was landed in the house of armor, what was the next development?"

"She was doped and kept in cold storage till——"

"By heavens!" Vail ejaculated, angrily, "I've a notion right now——"

"Let's go on," requested the criminologist, quietly. "You then received the box from Epsilon, destroyed the tree that was ordered, substituted the friendless Miss Lee, and delivered her here. But how, when, and where was the ruby left in her shoe?"

"That was Lawbit and Scratch," informed the red-headed craven, mopping his forehead. "They

dared not keep the bloomin' stone, when they had murdered the Prince——"

"Wait!" commanded Garrison. "You're as well aware as I that the so-called Maharajah was no Indian prince whatever, but a thief who stole those gems to finance insurrections. You know he was murdered by a Hindoo fanatic, sent to get the ruby."

Abbey was pale, and heavily nodded his head.

"Yes, sir, I don't know why—I didn't mean to tell you anything but the truth. But Lawbit and Scratch robbed the Hindoo of the gems and let him in the house, where he was later killed. The fanatic, as you call him, did the rest. Lawbit was frightened to keep the stone—afraid the fanatic would get him—and we sent it along with the girl."

Julian rose.

"To deflect the murderer's attentions to her or to me! Of all the outrageous——"

Garrison waved him a gesture, and Julian resumed his seat.

"After that," said the criminologist, "the zealot, whose name, I believe, is Dinga Singh, so frightened all you intrepid gentlemen that you made the wildest, most desperate efforts to recover the ruby again."

"Good God!" said Abbey, profusely perspiring with fear, "hasn't he strangled Lawbit? And I'll go next, I assure you, gentlemen, unless——"

"You stole from this office the shoes in which you had hidden the stone?" insisted Garrison, calmly, as before.

"Lawbit did the work."

"And finding the ruby absent, after all, you enticed Mr. Vail down country, to Hackett Tides, to make him assist you by torture."

Abbey wriggled.

"What could we do?"

Vail leaned forward on the desk. "I should like to inquire right now whether or not Miss Lee was ever told that the ruby was placed in her shoe."

Abbey was frankly surprised.

"She was not, of course, Mr. Vail. It wouldn't do to permit——"

"Then what is the power that you and others of your ilk have constantly employed to compel her to do as you wished?"

Abbey had the grace to redden, slightly.

"That is quite another matter. She would probably prefer to answer that herself."

Vail continued with the questioning.

"Did you 'phone up ahead of me from Hackett Tides to arrange her abduction from my car?"

Abbey was uneasy.

"Somebody had to get on the job directly."

"Mrs. Cree was the woman who carried out the trick?"

"She calls herself Mrs. Cree."

Garrison volunteered the information she had always used several names.

"And then," resumed Julian, "you took Miss Lee at once to Lady Kent's—who is doubtless no 'Lady' whatsoever."

"She's a Lady, right enough, Mr. Vail, and no worse than many another."

"What was her part in the game, when I was 'doped,' as you call it, with tea?"

Once more Mr. Abbey squirmed. Only his hope for mercy induced him to continue his confessions.

"She had nothing to do with that part of the game. That was mine—and Scratch's—to get you to rights again with Lawbit."

Garrison nodded.

"Precisely as I believed."

Vail continued: "To get me to rights again with Lawbit? I presume that means subject me to pressure, as before, at the hands of that cheerful person, to compel me to surrender the ruby?"

"Quite right. And if only you could appreciate, Mr. Vail——"

"Never mind that at present," interrupted Julian. "To get back to Lady Kent. Will you kindly inform me what her interest in all this business is? It was she who either sent or took Miss Lee to the Comity Ball?"

"We managed that together."

"With what intent? To present her as Lady Constance Drew to Sir Hugh Pearson?"

"Quite right."

"Has Miss Lee ever been a party to the scheme?"

Garrison protested. "Oh, my dear old man, I'm certain——"

Julian waved him to silence, and Abbey shook his head.

"No, Mr. Vail, she has not."

"Has it ever been intended to make Miss Lee a spy?"

Abbey was again surprised.

"Certainly not."

"Why was she presented to Pearson as Lady Constance Drew?"

Once more the ex-gentleman reddened. "Because, sir, now that her uncle is dead, she's—I mean to say that was part of Lady Kent's game."

"A game to entangle that gentleman, perhaps, in a false alliance?"

Abbey writhed, with impatience and shame.

"It was Lady Kent originated that."

"What did you start to say about the death of Miss Lee's uncle?"

"Nothing. I mean that's her private concern."

"And where is Lady Kent?"

"The Lord only knows—she's fled."

"She also exercised some power over Miss Lee," Julian continued. "It must have been supplied by you. I demand to know what this power is that you have wielded?"

Abbey whitened about the gills.

"That, Mr. Vail, I must refuse."

Julian rose, as if to strike the cringing man before him.

"I told you I demand this information."

Abbey slumped down on his knees.

"I beg you—don't insist on that, Mr. Vail! I haven't kept faith with anyone. I'm a miserable

knave and a coward! I've disgraced my blood and the men that went before me. I'm afraid to face the music like a man. I've told you everything but this, Mr. Vail, and I beg you to pass that by. I've done no murders, stolen no gems, but Dinga Singh is a terrible man from whom I can never escape!

"Give me the ruby! Tell me where it is! Send me to jail if you like, but let me give it him back, *or I shall be strangled!* The stone isn't yours, nor Mr. Garrison's. It doesn't belong to the law—or to anyone here in New York! Let him have it again and take it away—or I'm doomed—I'm doomed! I'm doomed!"

The fellow was sobbing. His abject fear was a terrible thing to see. He clutched at the hem of Julian's coat and clung there like the wretched coward he had become.

"Good heavens!" said Vail, wrenching loose at last and moving a step towards the vase. "I've never wanted the ruby—the accursed stone would be well away from America! But to give it to you——"

"No! No! Not to me! Let me tell him where it is? Let me merely send him word that he may have it back? You're not safe an hour while you keep it, Mr. Vail! I swear to you, sir, that's the truth! The gem is a sacred stone!"

Julian flamed.

"Sacred, nonsense!—a sacred ruby! What is it but a lifeless bit of crystal?—a piece of polished dross? And what about a human heart?—the heart

of a beautiful girl, for a sacred treasure worthy the meaning of the word? I've no use for the stone! Garrison, it's time you took it away! The law can decide whose property it is, for I'll carry the burden no longer!"

He caught up the vase, quite empty of water, flung out the withered flowers, and dumped the huge gem on his desk.

One second it lay there, banefully gleaming, its refulgent depths like crystallized fire and petrified wine and blood. One second the fascinated Abbey stared upon it, dumbly.

Then came an amazing climax to the hour.

A strange, wild cry filled the room. The cover flew off from the monster box in the corner and out leaped a fire-eyed demon, clean mad with fanatical fury.

It was Dinga Singh, the East Indian zealot, who had slain two men for blocking his way to the stone.

In a single pounce he was at the desk and snatching the ruby to his breast.

He bowled both Vail and Garrison from his path, the detective going down by the desk. He cried out again, in some crazy exultation and bounded to the door.

He flung it open, brandishing a flame-shaped blade of steel, and was instantly darting down the hall.

Garrison was swiftly on his feet. He, too, gave a cry, and he and Vail were in pursuit.

They were barely in time at the elevator shafts to see their man leaping down the stairs.

They were ten flights up, and one car only coming, from seven floors above.

Garrison shouted for the car with all his might, while Vail plunged hotly down the stairs. He was far behind the desperate Singh, whom only the car could possibly catch before he could gain the bottom floor.

The car was descending rapidly, in response to Garrison's shouts.

But the Hindoo's plan was complete. Suddenly halting at one of the doors, where an elevator's cable hung motionless from the top to the basement of the building, he slipped in his hand and flung it open as if by long practice at the lock.

Even as Vail came racing down the stairs, and the car with Garrison started to drop, the black man leaped for the cables. They were barely three feet out from his stand, hanging straight in the center of the shaft.

He clung to them precisely like a monkey, swaying for a second with their oscillation, then down he shot, as a fireman slides on his polished rod, the grease hotly smoking on his clothes.

He struck like a plummet on top of the car that was halted for the hour in the basement. Its top was about at the level of the floor that led to the hall and street.

One wrench with his powerful hand and wrist sent the door banging back with a vibrant jar, and he darted madly out past the starter.

Garrison's car had raced at full speed to the bot-

tom. It had certainly been less than five floors away when Dinga was dashing from the building.

Garrison, dancing with impatience, saw the operator fail to throw back his lever in time. The car dropped half its length below the floor before it came to a halt. It was back in a jot, but the trifling delay was never to be recovered.

Hardly less quickly than Singh himself, Garrison darted outward to the street. But up or down, or near or far, there was not a sign of his man. Running here to a boy and there to a porter, wildly asking questions of both, the criminologist vainly sought help—and presently knew he was beaten.

CHAPTER XXXIX

BARBARA'S DOCUMENTS

VAIL came belated to the sidewalk, already convinced of their defeat. He had given up hope when the Hindoo took to the cables and scorched down the well like a fiend.

He presently found the criminologist, still rooting around in vain regret. By the look of chagrin on Garrison's face he felt they had probably seen the last of Singh and the great Gatama ruby.

"As clean and quick a get-away as ever happened!" was Garrison's just, if somewhat mournful, comment. "Take it all in all it was certainly 'slick' in every meaning of the phrase. I'm clean ashamed!"

"I'm clean relieved," was Julian's reply. "The ruby wasn't ours, nor the law's, as Abbey truthfully suggested."

"Abbey!" cried Garrison, suddenly. "We've lost that gentleman, too!"

And, hastening at once to gain a car, he was presently darting to the office, to confirm his latest fear. Mr. Abbey had certainly departed. There was no one present but Broughton, who had entered at the sounds of haste when the man from the box had fled. He had seen not so much as the heels of the red-

headed Briton who had come here to beg for his life.

"I'll get him! I'll get him again, by George!" said Garrison, emphatically. "I'll not be cheated of them all!" He started at once to set his machinery in motion, but Julian caught him by the shoulder.

"Never mind Abbey—let him go. There is something of far greater importance. I want to know, Garrison, what became of some papers I found in that armory room last night? My one hope is that you got them."

"Papers? What sort of papers?" Garrison asked him, at once. "I haven't had time to ask you yet what you did at that house last night."

Vail was enabled to render a decidedly lucid, if brief, account of everything done before he fell, after dragging Nettleton out to the top of the steps.

"I am certain I pocketed an envelope, sealed, and wrapped with tape," he concluded. "As a matter of fact, I may as well confess I went to the place to secure it. I feel convinced the documents are of vital importance to Barbara. I can scarcely face her without them. I have lived on the hope that you secured them, after I was taken to the station. If the fellow I fought returned and got them, after all——"

"Hold up," said Garrison, quietly interrupting. "You were probably searched at the station, as everyone is who arrives there under arrest. Let me get them on the 'phone." He reached for the instru-

ment and presently demanded a number. "You see," he resumed, while awaiting his connection, "the blue-coats took you for a thief. Nettleton they know. He was lying unconscious at the top of the steps, and naturally—— Hello, there, hello!"

The answer had come to his call.

"Is that you, Sergeant Duffy? . . . Yes, this is Garrison. . . . Say, last night you fellows had Mr. Julian Vail there, charged with being—never mind the charge. You had him, and 'phoned to me. I want you to find out immediately whether or not he was searched, and, if so, whether papers were found in his possession—a large sealed envelope—and, if so, where that envelope is at the present moment. . . . All right, I'll wait."

He turned to Vail as before. "Nettleton is going to recover, thanks to that hole you opened in the cellar and your efforts in getting him out. Valuable man to me. Did you say that the fellow you encountered had rifled the trunk when you came?"

"Pitched everything out on the floor."

"After those papers himself, of course. He must have thought them important. And, by the way, any further developments from Gardner, since our little séance at the Puryns'?"

"I cleaned him up at noon, when he thought he had me ruined."

"I told you he had inside information when the frame-up was worked on your birthday. Miss Enid Puryn had him posted, to complete her little—— Yes, yes, Duffy. . . . Hello!"

He cast a glance at Julian, then turned again to the telephone.

"You've got it?—you've found . . . I didn't say it was marked with Mr. Vail's name. . . . It's marked, 'Miss Barbara Lee,' or . . . Right! It was taken from his pocket. Hold it for me and I'll be there in fifteen minutes!"

Vail had leaped to his feet and caught up his hat.

"They've found it, all right?"

"They have, the blundering idiots—not to have told me at once! Will you 'phone to Miss Lee before we go?"

"Not till I get it in my hand."

He was already moving for the door, and Garrison swiftly followed.

In even less time than Garrison had promised, his car had fetched them to the station.

The envelope was there at the Sergeant's desk and was formally surrendered. Then Julian fled to the telephone, to report his bit of news.

His brief appeal to Barbara not to run away, no matter what the envelope contained, aroused such a joy that much of the nervous dread and apprehension she felt was driven from her brave little heart.

"I won't run away," she answered, at the end, "but perhaps you. . . I'm almost afraid—but it's got to be faced, of course. . . . You'll come as soon as you can?"

Vail and the criminologist were soon once more in the car.

"I think," said Garrison, naïvely, "I'll take my wife for a ride."

If Julian understood the delicacy of the hint, that the house would be left to himself and Barbara, he made no particular sign.

He merely said, "I have wondered when you took your recreation, or gave your wife a moment of your time."

"Some day," said Garrison, into whose eyes had come a wonderful light, "I'll tell you all about the romance of Dorothy and myself."

It was four o'clock when they came to his house, where Barbara was watching from the window.

She was pale, with some feeling of the moment's fatality for both their lives and happiness, and the sealed uncertainty contained within the parcel when he read her the inscription on the envelope for which she had hunted in vain.

> "For my Daughter, Barbara Lee,
> The sole and only issue of my body, to be opened by her at my demise.
>
> "Henry Lee."

She made no effort to speak as she took it in her hand, but she trembled with emotion and excitement.

Julian understood.

"You will doubtless prefer to read it by yourself," he said. "I will wait till you return. Meantime—God be with you, little friend, and bring you the fortune you deserve."

He kissed her hand, and, with brimming eyes, she fled.

Garrison, as good as his word, had readily coaxed his wife from the house for a treat in the open air. The big bright room where Julian waited overlooked the street, with the Park just over the way.

Julian stood there gazing forth and awaiting the fate that the hour must finally bring.

CHAPTER XL

THE VITAL MOMENT

WHAT time had actually sped, by the clock, Vail never really knew. It seemed to him a century dragged its weary length across the world.

His wildest imaginings had come into play to people the house with sinister forms that would crowd between him and his love. He was certain that Barbara had happened on something that neither she nor he could ever bear to face. He was torn with regret at the thought that, with the papers in his hands, he had weakly surrendered to the fates.

Had he burned them unopened and scattered the ashes to the winds, no power on earth, he argued to himself, could have kept him and Barbara apart.

He had paced up and down the apartment times without number, listening for any possible sound where Barbara had gone. He began to fear she had fled the house and gone, and was oscillating there in indecision when she finally came to the door.

He hastened across the floor to greet her.

She watched him, faintly smiling. She had wept, and her eyes were still brimming. In her hand she held a number of tear-stained documents, disordered and crumpled.

"If you want me to come, when you've read them," she said, "just give a little whistle, up the stairs."

She thrust the lot in his eager hands, and once more fled to an upper apartment.

"But, wait!" he implored. "Can't you tell me just as well?"

She shook her head.

"Please read them." And she was gone.

He carried the papers to the window and read them swiftly, uttering now and again a sound of indignation.

The written sheets set forth an extraordinary tale.

It was the story of the life and sufferings of Barbara's father. Briefly, the man was the second son of Earl Harkingby, Augustus-Francis Drew, whose elder son, a profligate young rascal, had utterly disgraced himself and family, finally committing a forgery for which imprisonment was imminent.

In one of those incredible impulses of sacrifices, possible only in the noble families of the older world, where blood and tradition are paramount, and the title's honor a fetish to be kept at any price, Barbara's father had taken the guilt upon himself, confessed to a crime of his brother's doing, and served a term to satisfy the law.

He had been released when his term expired, and had instantly departed the realm, making America his home and assuming but part of the family name, by which he could never be known. He had finally married an American lady of refinement, and with

her had been happy for a few brief years, till she died.

Barbara "Lee," his only surviving daughter, had been religiously kept in ignorance of the blot on the family escutcheon and her father's abandoned name.

At length had come one Willard Abbey, a fellow Englishman, himself of an old, distinguished family, and a dissolute associate of Earl Harkingby's elder son. This man, having discovered in "Henry Lee" the second son of the Earl, had blackmailed him consistently for years, with threats of revealing the past.

From Abbey, "Lee" had fled repeatedly, no more to avoid being impoverished than to remove his daughter from possible contact with the fellow.

After long deliberation, countless misgivings, Henry Lee had determined to set forth the facts and inclose the affidavits for Barbara's final perusal. The man's reluctance in acquainting his child with all these lamentable facts, was written large between the lines. His question of the honor, profit, or advantage of linking her name and identity at last with that of the ancient family that had flowered in his brother had long been present in his mind.

"Yet if only one day to free her spirit of the doubts it may have entertained," said the script, "I must hazard the pain she must experience to know what her father has been, and give her both the distress and the negative comfort of this confession of family facts."

Brief mention was made of the various towns where the man had made his home. Appended to that was

a short, clearly stated history of all the Harkingbys, even including a brief synopsis of the original patent by which the title was created. And this, with the lands and possessions appurtenant thereto having, as the statement set forth, been "entailed to the heirs, male or female, of the first Earl's body, lawfully begotten," could possibly descend to Barbara and create her a Countess thereby.

It was not this possibility, however, despite the fact he suddenly remembered that Abbey had let slip the fact that Barbara's uncle was dead, that brought Vail suddenly to his feet.

He understood everything at last—the fears that Barbara must have entertained, aware of some dark family secret, constantly dreaded—and the loyalty of her spirit in guarding her father's name—the courage with which she would have sacrificed herself and love rather than bring a sullied name to any man she might finally marry.

Vail could wait for no whistles or quiet signs that would summon her back to his side.

"Barbara—Barbara!" he called.

She came to the head of the stairs and started down.

He ran halfway up to meet her.

"Sweetheart——" he started, as he caught at both her hands.

She held him off.

"You've read it all?"

"Enough to know what a wonderful little woman you are—your father's loyal little defender! But

the worst of it is, your uncle's dead. You're the Countess Barbara—something!"

Her eyes were very wide at that, and the smile departed from her lips.

"Oh, but I'd rather not, Julian—please. I'd rather be just—your little friend."

He caught her abruptly to his heart, two soft lips on his own. He released her, just for a second, to look in her eyes, then clasp her as before.

"Barbara, my little mate!" he said. "My little friend—forever!"

CHAPTER XLI

EDEN

IT was nearly a week before at last a letter came from Willard Abbey to explain that Lady Kent, having come to New York with authentic news of the death of Barbara's uncle, plus inside knowledge of Henry "Lee's" history and family affairs, had hoped to turn it to her personal account.

She had done no more than take advantage of Barbara's fear of her father's past affairs and present her to Sir Hugh Pearson as Lady Constance Drew, which name would be hers, in addition to others, on succession to the titles and estates.

This letter had purposely been delayed while Abbey raised funds to escape from the land and return to European fields.

A month from the day Vail saw him last, by a queer, if unimportant coincidence, two related events transpired.

Julian and Barbara were married and the New York Evening *Star* contained the following bit of telegraphic news:

"GATAMA RUBY BACK IN HOLY TEMPLE

"Bombay, India, June 23.—After several months of absence from the ancient Kindure temple, in the Punjaub, the great Gatama ruby, so mysteriously spirited away, has been returned to the holy shrine. A few days ago, it is authentically alleged, the priceless stone was restored to the image of Buddha, where countless millions of Indian souls have cringed in superstitious dread, or knelt in transcendent ecstasy and fervor.

"Readers of the *Star* will recall our exclusive account of the murder of a Maharajah in this city in May, when this famous gem was stolen. The mystery of the ruby's presence in America, and of the crimes its possession entailed, and of the methods whereby it was finally restored as above related, has never been, and doubtless never will be, fully related."

The account might have added that one "Scratch" Parkinson, all-round crook and conscienceless scoundrel, having failed to obtain the great Gatama ruby, for return to Dinga Singh, had fled from Gotham, late one balmy night, taking steamer for the Argentine Republic, whence he never more meant to return. The story, however,

was fairly complete without this crumb of comfort.

Out of his world of wanderings and eccentricity the lone and silent skipper of a motor-boat, christened the *Kelpie,* sent a singular wedding gift.

It was a fair-sized bronze propeller, broken, but highly polished and suitably engraved.

This was the legend on the blade:

To

Jule and Barbara

from

Jim and *Kelpie*

Good Luck

Perhaps it was this that reminded the pair that Eden might possibly lie off alone, entirely surrounded by water.

Whatsoever it was, as a prelude to their honeymoon abroad, they came by themselves, on a sunny afternoon, to a bit of an island, set in the sea like a priceless jewel of grass and trees, and were marvelously filled with nature's joy.

And they stood out at night, with the stars and the tides reflecting the glories of their love.

Barbara nestled against his side in the absolute sweetness of surrender.

"I'm so happy," she said, "I don't know what to say."

"I do," Vail answered, folding her close in his arms, "—my wondrous little *Gift of the Gods!*"



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